

Three Women and an Unmarked Map

A Literary Journey through Argentina and Chile

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For Dick and Susan
with love

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Declaration

I declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. I have consulted all of the references cited. The work has not been previously accepted for a higher degree.

Signed



Fiona G. Parrott

Abstract

This thesis interweaves the lives and works of three Latin American women writers – Victoria Ocampo, Alfonsina Storni and Gabriela Mistral – into a travel narrative undertaken as part of a research project. The journey begins in Glasgow, Scotland and takes the reader as far as Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Santiago, exploring the legacies left by Ocampo, Storni and Mistral. Through a variety of interviews, encounters and experiences, against the backdrop of political unrest of 2002/3, a colourful tapestry unravels to reveal why and how these three women made such a profound impact on their people and countries. The researcher/traveller was able to explore culture, custom and history through the generous hospitality of local artists China Zorrilla, Monica Ottino and Eduardo Paz Leston. The narrative recalls relationships shared between Victoria Ocampo and Virginia Woolf, Jorge Luis Borges and Graham Greene. Questions of class, society and the after effects of Argentina's Dirty War are considered, and Chile's past is investigated through the open testimonies of present day Chileans. The researcher/traveller learns (sometimes the hard way) valuable lessons about how to survive as a twenty-something woman travelling on her own and reflects on the changes time has imposed, not only on South America but also on herself. The focus on the 'inner journey' is vital to the overall theme of women and the sense of self. By staying in youth hostels an element of the backpacker's subculture is incorporated into the overall story, which in turn surfaces as a parallel theme.

The narrative is broken up into forty-one chapters which are divided into two separate sections; one relating to Argentina and Uruguay, the other to Chile. The section

on Argentina and Uruguay makes up the majority of the text, while the section on Chile can be interpreted as an extended epilogue. Both sections are completely unique in terms of circumstance and material but complement each other in their preoccupations with the troubled terrain of gender, writing and travel.

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Preface

When the University of Glasgow accepted me for a PhD in Creative Writing four years ago, I was ecstatic. Not only was I being offered the opportunity I had always dreamed of but I was one of the pioneers (and the first woman) to undertake this new postgraduate possibility. The borders around my initial proposal were a little watery. I knew I wanted to travel to Argentina and Chile and write a book about my journey but I had to find an angle, some kind of creative and critical connection that would make the journey much more than just a trip.

For the first year of the degree, I spent my days in the library. I read all I could about Argentina and Chile. I brushed up on my Spanish and when I was not reading, I was taking notes. My reclusive lifestyle proved, at times, extremely lonely but I persevered and by the end of that year, I felt like an expert on everything Argentinean and Chilean – especially in regards to literature.

It was then that I revised my initial proposal into a literary pilgrimage. I chose my favourite writers (out of the hundreds I had dipped into during my research) as guides and decided to follow in the paths they had left behind. When the University approved this new idea, I drew up a rough itinerary and was soon off on an adventure that was imaginative, intellectual, and experiential.

Looking back on the experience today, I suppose I was a little naïve and compulsive. I gambled blindly, without even realising it, and although I made it home in one piece, it could have easily gone the other way. However, with all the bumps, twists

and turns, I would not have taken one moment of the experience back. In fact, if I could do it all over again I would, without a second thought.

Introduction

It began with a map of Latin America and a search for the women who represented the high points of women's writing in Latin America. In a tradition largely dominated by male writers and established conventions a small group of women stood tall among the crowd. I wanted to understand why and how they had achieved and attained their reputation and the recognition they undoubtedly had won for themselves. Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979), for example, is a name as well known in the literary and cultural world of Argentina as her most famous contemporaries – Borges, Mallea, Bioy Casares to name but a few. All of them were friends and colleagues of hers. Yet unlike these and other famous contributors to her outstandingly important journal *Sur*, her writings consist entirely of personal memoirs and critical essays. It is as if her most important creative enterprise was Victoria herself.

Perhaps, in some sense, all three of the women who claimed my attention wrote to affirm their separateness, their survival in a world dominated by men. Unlike Victoria, Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938) had neither the social connections nor the personal fortune that could win her a space in the literary world. On the contrary, she was poor for most of her life, and her health was never good. Victoria, by contrast, enjoyed both riches and robust health. In many respects she lived like a man – she was independent and confident. Storni had a child out of wedlock and was under constant scrutiny. Her poetry is suffused with the feeling of a woman struggling in and against her circumstances. To a certain extent, her fame and recognition as a writer came after her early death. Tragically, the

manner of her death is probably what she is best known for. Even today, her memory is largely celebrated on the anniversary of her death.

Voy a dormir

*Teeth of flowers, my habit of dew,
my hands of grass, my sweet nurse,
prepare my sheets of earth
prepare my cover of thorny moss.*

*I am ready to sleep, my nurse, lay me down.
Put a lamp at my head;
take any constellation of stars and bring them down to me;
any one, any one would be good.*

*Leave me now you can hear the waves break...
Oh and one more thing
I would ask you to do:*

*if he calls again
tell him not to keep calling
tell him I have gone out...*¹

This poem sent to the newspaper *La Nación* was received on the day of her death. For me this poem was surprising, even startling. Many writers have left suicide notes, of course. But Alfonsina's work, and indeed her life, was a struggle; her work is full of defiance, of resistance. Against that background, this poem is hard to explain and to justify. Perhaps, I wondered, it had something to do with Mar de Plata itself.

Ocampo, by contrast, is remembered for her activity as a cultural entrepreneur, the sponsor and patron of a literary generation. Her landscape was the city of Buenos Aires – and it figures repeatedly as a character in her work, as community, as place, as tradition. I wondered to what degree these writers were writers who wrote from their experience as women in a particular place.

Ocampo was a close contemporary of the other female monument of 20th century Latin American literature – Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), Nobel prize-winner and ‘mother of America’ as she was known, a name given to her by José Vasconcelos, minister of Education in the post-revolutionary government of Mexico, and a writer and memoirist of considerable reputation in his own right. Yet Gabriela, for all her stature, was herself riven by private contradictions.

Gabriela, whose real name was Lucila Godoy, preached the importance of a woman’s place as mother and homemaker, yet she herself was a lesbian who never remained in one place for very long. She was a strict vegetarian but smoked and drank whisky with great pleasure. She fought for the rights of indigenous people and yet, behind closed doors, she was a racist.² Because of her international status, she is one of Chile’s most famous writers; her ‘floating face’ painted on stamps, walls and money throughout her native land.

Though much of her life was spent outside Chile, as a diplomat and a cultural icon, there is an inescapable connection with the landscape of her country. Her most famous poems, for all her international reputation, are intimately local.

Todas íbamos a ser reinas

*All of us were to be queens,
ruling four realms beside the sea:
Rosalía and Efigenia,
Soledad and Lucila.*

*In the Valley of Elqui, surrounded
by a hundred mountains, or more
burning with red and saffron
like tributes or offerings.*

*Drunk with our story-telling
we truly did believe*

*we'd all of us be queens
and we'd all get to the sea.*

*Seven-year-olds in pigtails
and bright cotton jumpers,
chasing shy thrushes
in fig-tree shadows.*

*Infallible as the Koran,
we said that our four countries
would be so big and so well-planned
they'd reach exactly the sea.*

*When the time came to marry
we'd have four bridegrooms,
all kings and musicians
like David, King of Judah.*

*And being so tremendous
our kingdoms could have plenty
of green seas, seas of algae,
and crazy wild pheasants.*

*And having every kind of fruit
and milktrees and breadtrees,
we'd never cut the guayacan
or know the taste of metal.*

*All of us were to be queens,
and well and truly rule the land;
but none of us was ever queen
in Arauco, in Copán.*

*Rosalía kissed a sailor
whose wife was already the sea.
A storm in the Guaitecas
swept his kissed mouth away.*

*Soledad brought up seven brothers;
she left her blood in her bread.
Her eyes that never saw the sea
held darkness instead.*

*In the vineyards of Montegrande,
on the pure bread of her breast
she nursed the sons of other queens*

but her own sons never.

*Efigenia passed a stranger
in the streets, and followed him
without a word, not knowing his name,
for a man can seem to be the sea.*

*And Lucila, who talked to the river
and the mountain and the reeds,
in the months of madness
received her sovereignty.*

*She counted ten sons in the clouds,
and called the salt-flats her realm,
in the rivers she saw her husbands,
and her royal robes in the storm.*

*But in the Valley of Elqui, ringed
by a hundred mountains, or more,
other girls who came are singing
and those to come will sing:*

*'We will be queens upon the earth,
and well and truly we will rule,
and our realms will be so vast
we'll all of us come to the sea at last'³*

But it was her life, more than her work, that coaxed me to take a closer look.

*Since I am a vagabond soul, in voluntary exile, it seems I only write from a
central place, surrounded by a mist of ghosts.⁴*

From the moment I came across the *Testimonios* of Victoria Ocampo, from the instant I saw her photograph, something powerful drew me towards her. At the time I did not understand why I felt such an intimate connection, until I recognised that Victoria reminded me of my Russian grandmother: a courageous, strong, exceptionally beautiful woman who chose to live independently of both marriage and social norms. Like my

grandmother, Victoria carved out her own life's path and rarely looked back. What impressed me most was her honesty,

Literary ambitions? Of course I have them! If you knew, my dear, all that I would like to achieve, the writers I would like to equal! But I won't succeed in doing anything with the novel... I'd never be able to create a character... All the characters would be "I" in disguise.⁵

I felt a close bond with all three women because of their work, the way they lived and the subjects they chose. Ocampo was fascinated by literature and took command of her own life. Some people are writers, and know no other way to live; she recorded every instant of her interesting and varied life. And although she was wealthy, she was rebellious and iconoclastic. It was not only the stir she created with her short-sleeved blouses; it was her creation of herself as a literary self, her powerful role as a cultural entrepreneur, and her dedication to the theatre. In some of these areas, the connection was personal, a direct link to my own life. But there was a larger question of how each of these women saw writing as a means of liberation, the achievement of freedom and the affirmation of the self.

I would be thirty in a year's time and felt that this journey was my rite-of-passage. I had come to a crossroads; I was leaving one decade for another, and I began to ask myself what it meant to be a woman and a writer. I was also fascinated with travel and with Argentinean and Chilean culture. So I began exploring. I was searching for connections between my questions and my interests; Victoria Ocampo, Alfonsina Storni and Gabriela Mistral seemed to reflect both. Ocampo was in her thirties when she started writing seriously; Storni's life wove independence and writing tightly together and Mistral was always on the road. In the past I had travelled to explore the world, myself

and sometimes to escape a relationship gone wrong, but now things were different. I was travelling to unravel the lives of these three women writers; the questions I asked of myself, I would also ask of them.

Alfonsina Storni attracted me because of her independence and I was even more intrigued as to why there was so little information available on her. Although famous in Argentina, she was relatively unknown beyond its borders. What I did know about Alfonsina was that she was a single mother, a poet and a feminist. She was born in Switzerland, came from humble beginnings and committed suicide at the age of forty-six. Her poetry was revolutionary for her time because she wrote openly about subjects that were considered inappropriate and untouchable, particularly for women writers.

*Her black hair falling forward,
Beautiful woman, middle-aged,
Kneels, and a suffering Christ
Looks at her with pity out of his hard wood.*

*In her eyes the weight of an enormous sadness,
In her breast the weight of a child to be born,
At the foot of the bleeding white Christ she prays:
'Lord, this child of mine, don't let it be born woman!'⁶*

My plan was to find my own path and cover up my tracks as I went. Not knowing anyone in South America would make things difficult but not impossible. Solitude does not impose itself easily or often, for when my roots find soil to reach through, they normally find others to entwine with. I wanted to at least try to avoid the *Lonely Planet's* highway of familiarised recommendations. I did not want something popular or predictable and refused to take a backpacker's tour.

But in spite of my dream...I began to feel, at the simple idea...an uneasiness in the pit of my stomach as one feels the night before an exam or a visit to the doctor whose diagnosis one fears.⁷

A note on translation

My Spanish was good enough to make sense of much of the writing, and I was secure in the belief that I would improve as I went along. The need to communicate with others is the best teacher. But I was as fascinated by the view that others held of these women – in other words their reputation, their ‘legend’ one might say, as I was by my own analysis of their writing. I wanted to experience their writing in their world. Admittedly I was going to read some of the work in translation, and my own knowledge of Spanish was not sufficient to make critical comparisons between translations. But the experience I was seeking was an intercultural one.

I was interested in the encounter between myself as traveller, as bearer of one culture, and three women with whom I felt much in common, and who had also travelled in a similar way. It was the encounter that interested me – how much that was new could come out of the meetings with these women or their memories, their ghosts or their ‘reputations’ for me and to enrich their narratives and legacy for the western world too. That was the unmarked map whose stopping places I hoped to mark and name.

Chapter One

Getting There

Some regions of the earth...attract us because of a mysterious relationship we have with them. Their character and size seem to be the image of some secret landscape which we see with the inner eye when we are blind to our actual surroundings. And sometimes these twin images – the real and the ideal – coincide so closely that we can no longer tell which of the two is a copy of the other.

– Victoria Ocampo

From my dark but cosy tenement flat back in Glasgow, I had imagined what might be waiting for me on the other side as fifty different kinds of rain beat against the window. Mine was a romantic vision of wide avenues, golden grass, old-fashioned *gauchos* who embodied Martin Fierro* and a yolk-shaped sun, until I started to run out of real time. Desperate for long-term accommodation, I pictured my future room bare, with cracked walls and a split window that opened out onto a shady lane but then panicked at the idea of such complete isolation. How would I immerse myself within the local culture if I was hidden away from it? What I was looking for was a room of my own in a communal house full of local people where I could write but where I would also have the opportunity to interact with others. This would be ideal and after exchanging a few emails with the owner of the Gardenhouse, who seemed sane enough, I booked the cheap room named after Salvador Dali for the month of October.

When the owner wrote offering to pick me up from the airport for a small fee, I hesitated momentarily. In addition to my physical journey, I was also beginning an internal, intuitive journey. I would have to be twice as careful as a man and hoped the

* The protagonist of José Hernández's epic poem of the same name.

guy with the nose ring and yellow jacket was not some crazed maniac because within minutes of meeting him, I would have to trust him with my life.

As I walked down the creaking metal steps of the aeroplane and into the still Argentine air, an Italian accented Spanish language floated around me and made me realise how far I was from home. Theirs was the most distinct accent I have ever heard, sweet and soft but also quick and passionate like soulful music. Well-groomed children were crying, frazzled old ladies were fussing and what appeared to be six-foot models, dressed in sheets of leather and enormous red stilettos, stood before me in the endless twisting line. There were guards in camouflage green, with machine guns cocked and suspicious darting eyes.

Aside from its length, the actual journey was not so bad. I was searched five separate times at Glasgow International Airport, with shoes off and hands in the air but when my bags were rustled through, the female security guard complimented me on how organised and neat my things were, then she put everything back exactly as she had found it.

‘Here you go pet. Dinnae worry – it’s the wire in yer bra that keeps settin’ these machines aff. The same thing happens tae ma sister every time she’s flyin’. You’ve just got tae remember no tae wear the wans wae the wire when you fly oot and besides, you’ll feel mair comfortable.’

By the end of her search, I felt as if I was actually her sister. She pointed with her feet to the gate I was destined towards and wished me luck.

On my penultimate transfer from Miami to Atlanta (feeling as if I had already been around the world five times), I watched the lush, expanding greenery stretch out like

a giant's hairy, vein-lined hand over the blur of states in between. All of this wilderness reclined beneath the palest of skies, dusted with random specks of what could have been angel's hair. It was mesmerising and as I sat there drifting in between the moon's view and Jason Wilson's *Buenos Aires: A Cultural and Literary Companion*, the man behind me leaned over and told me about 'the most wonderful week' he had spent in Buenos Aires with his wife.

'The Argentineans are very kind,' he stressed in a laid back Florida tone. His tanned forehead wrinkled up like a curtain. 'It's a lot like Paris. You know – the people, the architecture...'

Listening patiently, my thoughts gravitated to Victoria Ocampo and how she had spent her life forging connections between Europe and Argentina. I thought about her speaking French before Spanish and why Gabriela Mistral once questioned her about being so 'Frenchified'. With this stranger's observations, it made a little more sense. And if Mexico City could have boulevards mirroring those of Madrid, like the Paseo de la Reforma with its gilded statues and sweeping avenues, then why couldn't Buenos Aires resemble Paris? Lost in the possibilities, the gentle Floridian filled the recycled air with a note of assurance.

'And if you're worried about being there on your own, the hotels are very good, very attentive. If you want to go anywhere, they'll call you a cab but don't hail them off the street. That's supposed to be dangerous, especially for someone like you.'

I began to feel like an over-age orphan on the run. Unlike Victoria Ocampo with her entourage of cows (because European milk was not good enough), servants and cash or Gabriela Mistral with diplomats waiting to greet her in every port, I would have to

make my own way, sacrificing comfort and familiarity for adventure – a sacrifice I was more than happy to make.

The Floridian and I eventually found ourselves beneath a dozen glaring transfer screens which reflected off his glasses in a strange futuristic way. We were in Atlanta's air-conditioned underworld where everything was shadowless and powered by fluorescent light. When he noticed that I had to wait another six hours for my flight to Buenos Aires, he took pity on me and invited me to wait with him in Delta's *Crown Room*. He introduced himself as 'Bernie', shook my hand, then took the ticket from his blazer pocket, comparing its numbers with the screen. My intuition told me that Bernie was okay and after the day and a half I had already spent travelling alone, it would be nice to continue a conversation that existed outside of my own mind.

Once we passed through the frosted glass doors, he showed reception his special gold card then told me to make myself at home. The place was elegant, refined, and I felt a little awkward dressed in jeans, a t-shirt and flip-flops that echoed off the windows like elephant steps.

We walked past suits reclining on soft leather sofas, sampling free cocktails and tossing back pretzels from tiny paper cups. CNN blasted off each giant TV screen like technicolour wallpaper. Bernie waited until I looked comfortable then disappeared. Three hours passed before he found me again, watching asphalt merge with the heatwaves of the runway.

Bernie placed his briefcase beside the chair then began sharing various stories from his life, rich stories full of detail, heavy emotion and backdoor history. He told me

how he had fought in the Korean War, how Miami was more Cuban than anything else and finally, more about his time in Argentina.

Bernie and Delta's *Crown Room* did, for a little while, take my mind off all that I was already missing. My fiancé R. and I had had a difficult time saying goodbye but the morning I actually left, well, it was a little like *Casablanca*, only instead of me leaving him for another man, I was leaving him for three dead women and an unmarked map. We could not sleep the night before. As the shipyards on the Clyde blew their whistles, as the magpies argued over who was loudest and dawn stretched its glowing fingers up through the fading stars, we took our favourite walk beside the river Kelvin. We passed a gazelle-shaped jogger and a few rubbish men laughing and smoking as they threw torn bin bags into the back of their beeping truck. Their conversations followed us a little way up Byres Road; past the Tinderbox Café, Oxfam, Roots and Fruits, all sealed shut by steel blinds. The quietness of this normally pulsating street felt eerie until we came to the Botanical Gardens. Magnolia blossoms fell from bare branches. Newly planted indigo pansies lined the garden's rim. Strolling through hand in hand, we descended down to the slippery river's edge, muddy and raging from the previous day's deluge. Surrounded by massive hog plants, hungry ducks and fidgeting squirrels, I was not sure if I really wanted to leave any more. Suddenly I was terrified, my mind crowded with questions but in the end I always fight the voice of doubt; the voice that tells me I'm not strong enough, the one that insists it would be easier to stay put. It took all of my strength and what was left of my courage to leave R., but three months is not forever and unless I was jailed, kidnapped or murdered, we would be back in each other's arms by Christmas.

These memories clung to me as my Irish passport was stamped *Republica Argentina* without question or hesitation and I passed through customs with the ease of a native. There was chaos around the lone antique x-ray machine that seemed to be there more for the sake of appearance than function. Two gauchos stood before me in their ten-gallon hats and pet-sized moustaches that nearly hid the cigarettes burning from their lips. It felt so different. I felt so different. Even the air sat in my lungs with a strange damp heaviness. I dragged my backpack through the archway to the other side of the gate where dogs, babies and generations of families waited.

Patiently standing there, amongst the wilting bouquets and bodies, was a guy with a nose ring, yellow jacket and cardboard sign with my name on it. He was very tall, with dark centerless eyes, a well-cut jaw and an enormous amount of unbalanced confidence. His aura and appearance clashed; a mixture of Californian surfer meets Wall Street CEO. Cool and calm but also brisk and businesslike. He was younger than me by a couple of years and was what is commonly known as a *porteño*.

He introduced himself as Martín.

‘Mucho gusto,’ I said holding out my hand but instead, he kissed each of my cheeks with a ‘Hello’ then picked my backpack off the floor and walked me to his shiny new Volkswagen. It reflected the sharp blades of sunlight and both front seats were reclined to 45-degree angles. Martín spoke to me in perfect English as he adjusted the radio until the *Chili Peppers* found clarity. With one hand he turned over the engine and with the other, he searched for cigarettes. We pulled out of the empty parking lot like bandits. The flatness, concrete and grey horizon wrapped me up in its heat.

We drove away from Ezeiza Airport and I thought about what had happened there in 1973; violent images of left and right wing supporters clashing as they waited for Perón to return from his exile in Spain. I contemplated the scars in Argentina's history, immediately chilled by the statistic of 30,000 people mysteriously 'disappeared' by the military during the period of the 'Dirty War', 1976-83. All I could see was torture and death.

The drive into town consisted of a series of rickety old toll points, a wide ashen motorway and crumbling high rises with tiny windows that framed the faces of curious children. We rolled each of our windows down and raced past everything as Martín told me about the Gardenhouse, its present lodgers and how it came to be. He explained that he and his childhood friend Javier had gone into business six months ago. The divorce of Martín's parents shifted the sad story of a broken family into a flourishing business opportunity. Because the devaluation of the peso made Argentina a possibility for more Western travellers, Martín and Javier decided that the best way to use their marketing degrees was to invest in the backpacker rush.

'The past six months have been extremely successful,' he said casually as he lit a cigarette, nodding his head to *By the Way*. 'The house is full of travellers from England, California, Holland and Australia.'

'Are there any Argentines?' I asked, with a hint of disappointment even if I already knew what the answer would be. Why would Argentines stay in a guesthouse? Who was I kidding? Travellers normally stay with other travellers.

We passed through another toll point reaching across twenty lifeless lanes. The sun was so bright, I found myself constantly adjusting my sunglasses. Martín caught my eye in the process and as he changed gears, he answered:

‘Me and Javier are the only Argentines in the house. Most of our guests aren’t interested in hanging out with locals. They can’t speak Spanish and are much happier to be among themselves.’

‘Where did you learn English, Martín?’ I was intrigued. He spoke perfectly, without inflections or an obvious accent.

‘Oh, you know, TV, MTV and movies. I learn best from a screen.’

No wonder everyone feels they know about US culture – the power of Lucifer’s dreambox.

Laundry danced on rooftops, tired advertisements began to tear off their billboards and most, if not every building, was marked by a ‘*Se Vende*’ sign. Discarded newspapers, coke cans and plastic bottles lined the shoulder of the motorway like spectators in a parade. I shut my eyes to feel the dust of the morning mix with the fresh pre-rain air. It smelled of cattle, concrete and chocolate. The clouds were ready to burst as Martín’s tone changed, with deflated contempt, to Argentina’s current economic crisis and Buenos Aires’s various barrios. When we began approaching the barrio of Vicente López, he told me outright with a deep-seated anger that he hated how the poor areas were situated right beside the rich.

‘It’s disgusting.’ His upper lip almost curled as his grip on the steering wheel tightened. ‘A big house like this next to something like that.’ He pointed his cigarette at a tin roof shack with an old tattered sheet for a door. Just beyond it, several barefoot

children lingered around the traffic lights armed with buckets of soapy water and squeegees. Behind the shack and children stood a three-storey mansion with cast iron balconies, barking German Shepherds and a dissuading electric fence.

A block away sat the Gardenhouse. A red tiled roof, brick exterior and non-electric but still protective gate, radiated a warmth that made me want to knock and go inside. The front door was detailed pine, carved and stained to a modest kind of elegance. I glanced up and down the street at the four guards all dressed like those at the airport coupled with intimidating machine guns. Stoically they waited beneath the shade of branches, heavy in flowers and leaves.

No longer interested in helping me with my bag, Martín buzzed the intercom on the left side of the gate. It crackled before a woman's soft voice asked, 'Quien?'

'Martín!' He winked like a bartender. 'Fiona,' he put his hand on my arm. 'Welcome to the Gardenhouse.'

Chapter Two

The Gardenhouse

There are swans in the little pond at San Isidro. When you go to the water's edge to have a good look at them – although you don't talk to them the way you would a dog or a cat; they wouldn't understand – they spread their wings with rage, and they rise up with their long necks, ready to bite you. They are wicked, even though they're so white.

– A young Victoria Ocampo

We walked over smooth hardwood floors that creaked with every step. The flesh-coloured walls were cracked and held nothing but old paint. All the windows, protected by black criss-crossing bars, filtered light into rectangular pools. Downstairs was separated into a kitchen and dining room that opened up into a bright living room, full of creamy cushions and Persian rugs. A computer sat in the corner beside the window, along with a one-eyed ginger cat who stared at the screensaver of floating tropical fish. I smiled, then turned to see a stereo, TV, VCR, dozens of CDs and videos that faced a sealed fireplace. Martín explained, as the cat's meow grew in strength and volume, how I was free to use whatever I wanted and that the cat, 'Junior,' had been born on his left knee.

Martín told me to leave my things on the floor by the front door then took me upstairs. He showed me the three bedrooms, two bathrooms (one with a massive Jacuzzi) and three balconies covered in purple petals. I felt as if I was in a dream. Surely it could not be as nice as this? I had prepared myself for something rough, minimal and dirty.

'We almost named the Gardenhouse the One Eyed Cat,' Martín confessed. 'But at the last minute we changed our minds. The Gardenhouse has a cooler ring to it. And you know this is a *cool* place.'

Nodding, vaguely, I looked to Junior spinning circles round my calves. He arched his back longingly and when I stroked him, shed half of his coat in between my fingers.

‘This way –’ Martín beckoned me to the garden. I followed with Junior not far behind.

‘Look.’ Martín drew my attention to the bean-shaped pool full of mosquito larvae, a trampled lawn and old run-down pool house, which had been converted into a dorm room with six parallel bunk beds.

‘We have a lot of crazy, *crazy* parties out here,’ he boasted, again with a subtle wink.

After my tour, I met the others staying in the house.

A skinny Australian schoolteacher sucked on his cigarette like a lollipop. His jeans sat loosely on his hips and a tightly knit beanie cap covered frosted flicks of hair. His face was round but flat, his eyelashes unusually long. He was both shy and eager, as he stood up to welcome me.

There was also a Londoner who introduced himself as a journalist for the BBC and *Financial Times*.

‘Pleasure to meet you. Where are you from? Your accent is unusual.’ Full of observations and shuffling feet, he gave me one hand and kept the other on his waist. There was abruptness to his demeanour, a preoccupation in his posture. He too was smoking, only with an awkwardness reserved for non-smokers.

‘I’m not really a smoker, only I’ve taken to it since I’ve been here.’ He confessed as he blew out short puffs without really inhaling. ‘My friends at home would laugh if they knew.’

There was also a Californian guy who stood, practically naked, mixing a protein shake over the sink. He placed the glass down on the counter then gave me a firm, long hug. In a breath, his eyes glazed over and he explained how he was a writer and wrestler from Los Angeles and had decided to take a year off University to focus on his novel. He spoke to me in Spanish, with an unnatural, exaggerated lisp.

At the far end of the kitchen a small woman hunched over the stove frying breaded meat. She had a long, black braid hanging down the length of her back and was introduced to me by Martín as 'Edith the maid'. She was timid, wore a blue and white chequered uniform and when I asked her where she was from, she told me 'Peru' in a pure, gentle accent that sounded, if it could, like coconut milk. Her eyes were almond shaped and shone in the stillness that had consumed what was now the afternoon. Standing beside her was a blonde Dutch girl dressed in green and yellow lycra. She was my height, about my age and had just returned from her volunteer job at a homeless magazine downtown.

'Nice to meet you.' She kissed my cheeks before digging into a styrofoam tub half full of chocolate ice cream. She spoke with her arms, blue eyes flashing.

'Now there's three of us.' She looked to Edith then to me. 'It's good to have another woman in the house. Martín told me you were coming. We'll speak later but for now, I must go to the gym.' The front door skidded shut but the handle continued to rattle.

'She's been sleeping in the Dali room and was supposed to be gone by today but...' Martín's voice trailed off as he opened the refrigerator door, reached for a pizza

box then took the last slice. 'So, until she leaves and believe me, I am sorry, but all I can offer you is a bed in the garage. It will only be for a couple of days at the most.'

Chewing, he did not wait for my response but apologised to the Aussie for eating his last piece of pizza. 'You know the rules my friend. If I find it, I'll eat it.' Alone in his laughter, he quickly suggested we go to the bank.

When we stepped outside I was relieved at the fresh air but began to feel the ponderous coat of jetlag dragging me down. Rain fell in cherry-sized drops; the loose cement blocks in the pavement splashed up muddy water without much warning. Once we got to the bank it was chaos; huge lines of tired people politely fussed and argued waiting for their turn. There were more big guards with guns, make-up-smeared tellers behind bulletproof glass and as the rain pounded against torn awnings, I held my very first Argentine note; a beautiful two peso bill.

The *El Norte* supermarket was only a few blocks away from the Gardenhouse and when I arrived, again accompanied by Martín, my breath was literally taken from me. The ribs of loitering children almost poked through their skin, pregnant mothers fiddled with the gaps in their gums and barefoot grandmothers cloaked in tattered fabric sold bags of orange spices, sliced root vegetables and bunches of wilted spring onions to those few passers-by who were interested. Together, these bruised generations sat on cardboard beneath the flickering sign that flashed like a casino. Automatic doors parted for Martín and me with a sucking sound and as soon as they did, several uniformed security guards clocked us. They too had guns that hung from either side of their cowboy belts. Theirs was most definitely a misplaced and over-used authority that, when fused with paranoia and suspicion, creates unnecessary tension. Immediately I felt guilty for something I had

not even considered doing. In addition to searching our bags the guards also frisked us, then only when they found nothing of interest, sealed our things with tight loops of police tape.

Everything shone yellow. I took a cart and began to stroll through the fruit and vegetable section. The tomatoes were rotting, as were the carrots and bananas. The apples looked fresh but were so heavily dipped in wax I could hardly distinguish one variety from the next. Mushrooms were browning, lettuce and broccoli ready for the bin. I could not understand how in a country so rich in fertile soil, farms and produce, supermarkets were selling crap like this.

When we returned to the house, after unpacking my groceries, I took a shower in a bathtub full of dead flies and mosquitoes. There was a skylight above, so I assumed they were victims of magnified light, either that or whoever showered before me was disturbingly dirty. Copper pipes carried the hot water to my face and I finally began to feel a little more human. The water was so soft against my skin. I could have stayed beneath that man-made waterfall for days, if the hot water had lasted longer than a few short minutes. I changed into my only other set of clean clothes then left my bags in the hallway, for lack of another option.

As a dishevelled group, we collectively journeyed into the centre of town. Piling into Martín's Volkswagen, I realised how odd it was to have this instant circle of Western acquaintances in a place like Buenos Aires. It was exactly what I was not looking for and I felt guilty in their company.

Martín gave a drive-by tour of the city with hands in the air and a scarcity of details. We passed a Japanese Garden full of feral cats, a law school shaped like an

ancient Greek palace and an enormous metal flower sculpture that remained open during the day but at night closed to conceal its glowing crimson centre. Because the Australian wanted to go shopping, we were heading towards a mall, a 'very special' mall, Martín promised. Bob Marley beat through our senses and it was nice to feel a pure moment of freedom, of youthful noncommitment that allowed me to sink into the city blowing fast against my cheeks.

The longer we drove, the more I realised that the distance from the Gardenhouse to the centre of town was further than I would have hoped. As we twisted and squeezed through gloomy corners opening up into corkscrew intersections, the city's enormity made itself known. Concrete towers and wide-open streets reflected colour off flower stands and picked out pedestrians, tiny against the ominous proportions. The salon-styled dogs, outdoor cafés, intricate walkways and windowsills did, however, remind me of Paris. Martín turned off the engine, rolled up his window then lit a joint.

'This grass,' his bloodshot eyes squinting inside all the smoke 'comes from Bolivia and to export it, they pee on it – the pee compacts it.' Running fingers through the curls of his hair, he winked (a nervous twitch perhaps?) and I wandered off to the edge of the roof to watch the River Plate's milky brown water move out to sea.

Directly beneath us, I noticed a parade of policemen on horseback. They looked sinister in their uniforms and dark moustaches, marching to a haunting whistle that felt like the sound of a bullet. Images of the Dirty War wove through my imagination.

One prisoner, pregnant, is offered the choice between rape or the electric prod. She chooses the prod, but after an hour can no longer endure the pain. They all rape her. As they rape her, they sing the Wedding March.

"Well, this is war," says Monseñor Gracelli.

The men who burn breasts with blowtorches in the barracks wear scapulars and take communion every Sunday.

"Above us all is God," says General Videla.

Monseñor Tortolo, president of the Espiscopate, compares General Videla with Jesus Christ, and the military dictatorship with the Easter Resurrection. In the name of the Holy Father, nuncio Pío Laghi visits the extermination camps, exalts the military's love of God, Fatherland, and Family, and justifies state terrorism on the grounds that civilisation has the right to defend itself.⁸

I did not want to attract the attention of the police and when I turned around to tell Martín that maybe he should save his joint for later, he rested both hands on my cheeks and spoke without reservation.

'Fiona, relaxxxxx. The police will not arrest a person like me. I dress well and it is obvious that I am from a certain class. If I was living in the park, if my clothes were torn and my feet were bare then yes, they would arrest me for smoking. The laws here are easy if you know how they work.'

He told me that, because I knew a true *porteño*, I would know how the system moved in no time. Then he held open a lustrous door leading to the marbled mall.

Compared to its Western sisters, he was right, this was no ordinary mall. It was exclusive, with stores selling limited designer items, sized for the emaciated and priced for the prosperous, or at least what was left of the prosperous. But the building was practically empty. The food stalls, escalators, mezzanines and doorways did not catch the soles of shoes, the conversations of mothers and daughters, the arguments of husbands and wives. It was as if the entire place had been evacuated and no one had told us about it. The Australian went crazy, stocking up on flared Levi's, jumpers and (optimistically) dresses for future girlfriends. I disappeared inside an art gallery.

The local artists' work on display was fascinating; bright but bold, eccentric but exceptional, exaggerated but with limitations and all full of sadness. There were

despondent papier mâché figures, liquid tangerine walls acting as a backdrop for historical scenes that portrayed starvation, sickness, abuse and poverty. There were thick textured oil paintings erupting in anger towards the past as well as present government.

A black haired woman with a small nose and big red lips approached me. She introduced herself as the owner of the gallery then asked me all sorts of questions; where I was from, what I was doing in Buenos Aires, did I like Argentina... and when I told her I was originally from San Francisco, she took me by the arm.

‘Qué interesante!’ Her tone completely fascinated, she insisted I sit in her seat behind a large wooden desk in the middle of the gallery. She handed me a fresh cup of sweetened coffee. I did not have the heart to tell her that, like an addict, coffee made me shake. Too much of it in college threw me to the tea side after graduation and since then, I had not drunk the stuff. It had been six years, so I sipped her offering slowly. I did not want to offend and coffee was a big part of Argentine culture. She told me that if I needed anything I knew where to find her, that arriving in a different country without family or friends is a big step to take. We spent the entire afternoon together in that gallery of gloom, of past and present sentiment, until the others found me, their arms laden with the Aussie’s shopping bags.

I fell asleep on a sagging single mattress in the garage. The floor was cold and damp. There were stacks of wet paint cans beside my head and the hum of the refrigerator was not exactly out of earshot but I was too tired to care. Shivering, I pulled the tattered sheet up around my ears and reminded myself that I had actually made it without too many hitches. Like Alfonsina (who unlike me was pregnant and nineteen when she first arrived in Buenos Aires), I was alone but finally here, in the heart of

Argentina. Pride and a real sense of independence enveloped me. I slipped into a dream that would take me home to R., if only temporarily, and there I would stay until morning.

Chapter Three

The Face of the City

*I'm leaving my love...The train
moves slowly.
someone shouts my name. Who is it?
I let my forehead fall
onto my forearm and I say:
Hurry on, train, be fierce,
and finish me off.*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'Train'

I left the Gardenhouse and walked beneath the lilac shade of what I learned to be jacaranda trees and the sweet essence of ripe orange blossoms in full bloom. Passing mansions with chained German shepherds and maids brushing driveways in long wing-like strokes, I wondered if these porteño residents were economically struggling. There were speciality shops with barrels of dried apricots, figs and walnuts. Pavement fruit stalls teeming with avocados, kiwis and tomatoes. It was odd to see pharmacies selling purses, butchers selling diet coke and cobblers with earrings in their window displays. All of this and more adorned the streets leading to Vicente López train station.

The air was sticky and tropical. I squeezed my way into a space between business suits, women in black blouses, children in their school uniforms and old men with tweed caps. It was midday and yet the carriage was packed. I held my bag against my belly and stared out of the window.

On the way to the centre of town, murals of Che Guevara, *Vote Green* posters and quiet suburbs flashed by, quickly transforming into blocks of tired high rises and boys playing football. When the train eventually pulled into Estación Retiro, its grandness and

elegance overwhelmed me. Glass ceilings arched over the immense space in between. Olive-tainted rafters repeated themselves over clocks with Roman numerals, flower baskets and sandwich stalls.

Outside the station, black and yellow Peugeot taxis zipped like bumblebees and antique buses, painted according to their routes, rattled by. Life seemed to balance on the sleeve of old and new. French architecture reclined in broken layers, majestic entrances, balconies and bougainvillaea fountains eclipsed by bland, symmetrical Marriott and Citibank monoliths. Closer to earth, a Shetland pony and shabby llama cloaked in rainbow ponchos waited beside a man holding a tin cup. Enthusiastic vendors auctioned canvas bags, leather belts, razor blades and a variety of pastries stacked high in wicker baskets. A hopeful man without legs dragged himself towards shelter. Nursing mothers with cherub faces begged with one hand on their babies and the other opened up to the shifting sky. An old woman pulled her skirt up to shit in the gutter.

Entranced by the size of Torre de los Ingleses or the *British Tower*, I had to arch my neck back to see its small copper dome, slim brick body and black clock hands clicking over. Walking around the wide base, I read a little about its history and was surprised to learn that it was inaugurated on the 24th of May 1916. This tower was a gift by the British residents to honour the centennial of Argentina's great revolution on the 25th of May 1810 – a revolution that freed Argentina from Spanish rule. After the Falklands/Malvinas War in 1982, the name of the tower officially changed to Torre Monumental or *Monumental Tower*.

As I crossed Avenida del Libertador, I dodged traffic and pedestrians, quickly learning there are no laws or lanes to Argentine drivers, only destinations.

*Streets that are sad, grey, straight and equal
 where sometimes you can catch a patch of sky
 its dark facades and tarred ground
 stifled my tepid spring dreams...⁹*

On the other side of Plaza Libertador was Calle Florida, the most famous street in all of Buenos Aires; a narrow but popular thoroughway renowned for leather, fur, shoes, literature and old world institutions like Harrods with window displays of traditional English life, even if the building stands empty. It was the first paved street in Buenos Aires, the first street to have electric lights and is the closest place to Rue de Rivoli this side of the Equator, but it is not immune to the economic virus sweeping the nation. No place is. Calle Florida lent its name to the aristocratic avant-garde Florida literary group of the 1920s: Jorge Luis Borges, Norah Lange and Oliverio Girondo were among its members. As a counterpoint to the Florida group there was the Boedo group, named after a street on the working class side of town. 'Boedo vs Florida [was] a literary polemic which began in Buenos Aires in 1924 and lasted little more than a year, it came to public notice through its publication in the review *Martín Fierro* (1924-7). At that time Florida was the city's most elegant street where the offices of the magazine promoting the avant-garde were to be found; Boedo was in the lower middle class and working class immigrant area where the magazine *Claridad*, representing the cultural left, had its offices. They became the social and cultural symbol of two aesthetic positions (the avant-garde and the realist school), but also the emblem of the problems that divided the cultural life of Argentina in the 1920s.'¹⁰ The Florida group believed in 'art for art's sake' but the Boedo group felt art, and indeed writing, had important social responsibilities.

For many years, Victoria's family lived on Calle Florida. ...*on the corner of Florida and Viamonte, there stood a very large colonial house with iron grating on the windows, three patios, two cisterns and well-tended plants. Azaleas, camelias, and gardenias leaned against the walls warmed by the summer sun. A small, dark staircase led up to a flat sun-roof covered with pink tiles, but we, the children of the house, were only allowed up there in the company of an older person. What a disappointment!*¹¹

Florida continues to shift awkwardly beneath shafts of light, flickering signs and fast moving footsteps. With my first step on its tiled path, I met an accordion player who could not have been older than seven. He pressed and pulled his accordion as if it were a butterfly.

On Calle Florida, McDonald's lights burn, merchants are eager to lure you into their shops and kiosks hang newspapers out like beach towels. It is a strange kind of modern carnival during the day, replete with entertainers and a hundred flavours of ice cream, but at night it transforms into a busy market. Artists spend their days busking or begging and when night falls, they lay a blanket on the ground to sell silver jewellery, ceramic pens, home-made bread so dense and heavy it is nearly impossible to lift and hollowed gourds used as decorative cups.

Dodging the pavement's cracks, dips and numerous piles of dog shit, I continued walking towards the Plaza del Mayo where I had arranged to meet the Dutch girl. I liked her (even if she was still sleeping in my room) and her quirky contradictions. She seemed genuine, strong-willed, well-travelled (in a good way) and spoke nearly half a dozen languages. Her blonde hair, seasoned accent and Brazilian tops deceived many into believing she was actually from Brazil. During our early morning chat over the bathroom

sink with dripping toothbrushes and spools of floss, she told me that a Peruvian bodybuilding farmer she had met in an Andean bar held her heart in his hands and that her month-long internship with *Hecho*, Buenos Aires's homeless magazine, was nearly up.

Arriving at the Plaza del Mayo, I recognised it as the face of Buenos Aires (as it is the most familiar landmark of the city) only hosting more wrinkles now than it did during the public demonstration of May 1810, which ultimately led to Argentina's independence. Encircled by the Casa Rosada, which stands like a proud family of flamingos, the massive Catedral Metropolitana and smaller Cabildo, once the town council from 1725 to 1765, the plaza has always been a destination for political protests and activities, for politicians, tourists and celebrities.

I looked down at the bleached scarves painted over the pavement. They matched those of the marching Las Madres de la Plaza, old but strong, clutching picket signs with portraits of their missing loved ones. Today Las Madres are grandmothers and younger mothers join them; even children demand information of those lost during the Dirty War. Fuelled by grief, those old enough have been marching every Thursday for the last twenty-six years. Determined to find their missing sons, daughters, husbands, and mothers, they will never give up. They have received no recognition from the government of their whereabouts, or even their remains. What sickens Las Madres most is that the children born in military custody, whose mothers and fathers were killed by government officials, were secretly adopted by many of those officials. Those who were adopted are now my age and many, if not all, are unaware of their adoptive status. They are ignorant of the fact that the 'family' who raised them are actually responsible, directly

or indirectly, for the deaths of their biological parents. Will they ever discover the truth? Perhaps if Las Madres continue marching, one day they will.

While Las Madres handed out flyers with photographs of the missing, another protest was about to begin. Hundreds of people with banners and pots began flooding the streets around the Plaza. We were surrounded by a peaceful but angry crowd who spoke out against the government, demanding not only answers but compensation for their empty bank accounts. They chanted to drum beats and clashing pots that resonated with the bells of the Cathedral. More police in riot gear arrived and as the media set up their equipment, the Dutch girl and I stood infected by the fever.

Before the demonstration ended we were hailed by a group of homeless men, friends I assumed of the Dutch girl. Those who were not falling over drunk were offering me a drag of their communal cigarette. At first, it was frightening. The stench coming off them was pungent. And because the Dutch girl went off with the soberest of this garden party, I was left with the remaining four. I started a conversation with the only one still standing. He came from Russia, had icy eyes and leathery skin from all the time he had spent beneath the merciless Argentine sun. He reminded me of the Boris character in Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* with his attention to personal detail, although I doubt if he painted the flesh around his ankles black to disguise the holes in his socks. Even though this man had only a duffel bag, his shirt was clean and his hair was combed, but it did not take long to see how crushed his spirit was. He was submerged in depression and as he drifted between Spanish and Russian, he began to share with me small snapshots of his life.

He told me that he had once been a fisherman. He had a wife and son but deserted them in order to save them. *Save them?* I wanted to know more but my voice of reason told me not to pry, so instead I asked him if he had spoken with them since. He shook his head and as the cigarette came round to him again, he inhaled then sighed, 'They are no longer mine.' He looked to the crowd of protesters and exhaled. 'All I have left is this bag and it's all I will ever need.' My eyes drifted down towards the worn canvas army bag, sea-kissed and sturdy. 'I sleep on the streets and share what I have with my friends.'

I looked at these four people who called the Plaza del Mayo their home. They held such a sense of community, like a family, and I began to understand how homelessness can truly happen to anyone. The fisherman who came from Russia to find his fortune but ended up in what he later revealed as prison; his Bolivian friend whose mother died leaving him in shocking debt; the Peruvian carpenter who lost his job and soon everything else; the porteño lawyer who had to sell his home due to lack of work. What choices do they have in a society without social welfare, without a net to catch them falling? When another homeless man collapsed in the middle of the plaza, passers-by stepped over his cracked skull and moaning cries but the Russian rushed over to the payphone to call an ambulance then gently placed a jacket beneath his head to rest him on his side. It was heroic, noble, humane – I felt ashamed of 'civilised' society.

Eventually the Dutch girl returned with a box of white wine and litre of coke. She sat both on the grass and after we left them to mix their favourite cocktail, I asked her why she bought them wine instead of food.

‘It’s not our place to judge and besides, any money they come upon is spent on a box of cheap wine anyway.’ Rummaging through her bag, she pulled out a map. ‘Where to next? Should we get an ice cream?’

Because I wanted to go to the library to see what I could find on Ocampo and Storni, the Dutch girl led me to the only one she knew, not far from the Plaza. It was full of people. There were high shelves of leather bound books, dusty editions of *Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The building, brushed gently in shadows, had few windows and slim aisles that smelled of old paper mixed with fresh perspiration. Unfortunately, because it was the English Library, there were no books on Argentine writers. But we enjoyed ourselves anyway, skimming through chapters, feeling flaky paper between our fingers, remembering characters and stories from years past. Eventually, I would find another library, an Argentine library, but for now it was comforting to be in a place that reminded me of home.

Chapter Four

One Thing Leads to Another

I will try to guide them along the path which I have journeyed and loved in so many different ways, and I trust that my tourists will not feel too chagrined when they see how weak is my means of expression compared to the fervour that spurs me on.

– Victoria Ocampo

It is strange how a map's meaning is completely transformed after a few days of constant reference. What was once an unfamiliar page with unknown lines and landmarks quickly becomes as familiar as the grooves in your hand. Instead of hunting for a street name or province, your eyes move instinctively toward it. Soon the map is no longer needed and those lines and landmarks are intimate. They turn into a memory or emotion, a brief place in time captured by language, a photograph.

I wanted to start my research as quickly as possible, maps and all, and decided that the best way for me to begin was to ring my two contacts; contacts I eagerly accepted from my professor, Mike Gonzalez, back in Glasgow. These contacts were the only lampposts in the curling road ahead of me. I kept the napkin with their names and numbers tucked safely away in my bra because if I lost everything else, I knew I would at least have someone local to call. I could not call anyone from the house, so I found a nearby *locutorio*. Normally, locutorios are medium sized, ground floor offices divided up into ten or so personal glass booths, each with individual telephones, plastic chairs and clocking meters. This locutorio was busy and while I waited, the conversations seeping beneath the glass doors dared me to listen in. When my turn came, the woman in red

behind the counter said 'número siete'. She smiled and raised a long painted nail just in case I did not understand.

Andrew Graham-Yooll (Editor of the English language newspaper, the *Buenos Aires Herald*) was my first contact; he had lived through the worst of Argentina's Dirty War then was forced to leave the country to save his life. He returned in 1980 to testify against terrorist Mario Firmenich, leader of the Montoneros, who had kidnapped Graham-Yooll while he was a journalist with the *Buenos Aires Herald*. Graham-Yooll's courageous testimony forced him to seek exile in London for a further seventeen years.¹²

The man on the other end answered with a very English 'Hello'. His voice was familiar and I imagined he looked like Hemingway. There was that precision to his tone, that measured professionalism, an encouraging kind of patience. I started off with an introduction and went on to explain how my professor, his old friend, had given me his number.

'I was expecting your call,' he said, as we spoke generously about the man who had made our conversation possible. I then asked him about Victoria Ocampo and her estate, Villa Ocampo in the suburb of San Isidro. His answer was weighted in regret and loss. He emphasised how Villa Ocampo was in need of severe restoration and that Victoria's great niece, Dolores Bengolea, was trying to raise enough money to restore it. Because there are no signs or maps to the house, he suggested I first visit the Anglo-Argentine Cultural Institute on 1333 Suipacha Street. He was sure I would cross paths there with someone who could help me further. I was convinced that if I found the Anglo-Argentine Institute, I would find a footprint or two left behind by Victoria.

‘There’s a play,’ Andrew carried on with his suggestions. ‘*Eva and Victoria*. It’s based on a fictitious meeting between Eva Perón and Victoria Ocampo and toured Argentina to critical acclaim. They should have a copy of it at the institute. There’s also a monastery next door to Santa Catalina Church. Victoria was born there. It’s on the corner of San Martin and Viamonte. It might be a good place for you to start.’

I thanked Andrew, twice, and we arranged to meet at the *Buenos Aires Herald* the following week. Speaking with Andrew gave confidence, structure and a little more purpose to my jellyfish plan. Buzzing, I continued pressing numbers until my second contact, the feminist writer Lea Fletcher, answered the phone. She was a friend of a friend of a friend, which can prove difficult in explanation – especially in Spanish. Like Victoria, whose first and most prolific language was French, *I feel that Spanish words will never come to me spontaneously, especially when I am moved emotionally, when I need them most. I shall always be a prisoner of another language whether I like it or not, because that is where my soul became acclimatised.*¹³

Lea answered the phone with an Argentine accent, slick and fast, words blended then spun like batter. I returned her Spanish words with my own, only when she heard my accent everything transformed into what could have been Middle America.

‘Where are you from *girl*?’ Her English was tinged with a southern US twang that stuck to the phone then hung from it.

‘San Francisco.’ I said both relieved and confused that we were now conversing in English, that her seamless transition from one language to the next was so uncomplicated.

‘Well, what a small world. I’m from Texas but have been livin’ in Buenos Aires for the past twenty-two years.’

She told me I had arrived just in time for the Latin American Women Writers Conference, ‘All sorts of prominent writers from Latin America are gonna be there. It’ll be great.’ My eyes lifted, my pen raced as she continued.

‘I’ll give you the numbers of a few of Alfonsina’s biographers but some of them don’t get along so well, so I’d try not mention their names to each other when you’re speakin’ with them.’ I promised her I would not. ‘And if you’re lookin’ for a good bookshop, there’s one dedicated to women writers on 333 Montevideo Ave. Whatever you want, you’ll find it there. Maria Ester Vázquez just published a biography of Victoria Ocampo. I’m sure they’ll have a copy.’

There were signs on my road now, some even with subtitles. For the first time since I started this project, I felt that I had real leads – a definite direction to follow. This road would not only take me someplace but somewhere important.

My imagination pictured Lea as the Good Witch from the *Wizard of Oz*. As our conversation went on, her Texan twang grew stronger, a doorbell rang in the distance and several dogs started barking, ravenously.

‘I’m really sorry but I’m gonna have to go. The police are here.’

‘What’s happened?’ I whispered, thinking the worst and wondering what I could do to help.

‘Oh, it’s nothin’ really. I’m movin’ houses and in Argentina,’ her voice faded as she tried calming the dogs down in the background. I could hear a screen door creak, an electric tin opener spinning. ‘The police need to make sure you are who you say you are

before you leave one place for another. They come to the house you're leaving and ask all sorts of questions.'

Every country has its own strange net of laws and this cluster would be one of the many I would struggle to understand in Argentina. Fully aware of my bad timing, I was careful not to take up too much of Lea's time. I thanked her but before I managed an *adios*, she gasped.

'Oh God, you don't have blonde hair and blue eyes do you?' The speed of her words increased tenfold. 'Because it's really dangerous right now... You know, I dress down all the time because I've got fair hair and blue eyes. Let me tell ya girl, I'm real terrified of getting kidnapped and you should be too. You must be very, very careful because like me, you're a foreigner and foreigners are prime kidnapping targets.'

For Lea's sake as much as my own, I reassured her that I had once lived in Mexico City, that dressing down would not be a problem. When she realised I was not so naïve that I would sabotage myself, she relaxed but insisted 'never let your guard down'. Her advice chimed with Martín's but clashed with my inner optimism towards the city and its people. I thanked her again and promised I would be careful.

* * *

Before venturing into town, I tried changing more dollars for pesos. After consulting numerous friendly pedestrians, who exchanged directions for bits and pieces of my own personal history, I found the bank only to be told by the guard to come back later. When I inquired for a more specific time, he repeated himself, 'más tarde', gesturing with his chin to a place far, far away.

‘No hay más dinero,’ a woman shouted over the squeamish crowd stretched right around a greater part of the lopsided block. The bank resembled an auction house, crammed with eager buyers and anxious sellers armed with a few coloured notes clenched between tight fists. People began to disperse and as the doors were chained shut, I walked towards the train station.

Confused as to where I would find my next peso, I took the train into town with the remaining change in my pocket then walked up to the corner of San Martin and Viamonte where Santa Catalina Church and its neighbouring monastery stand like pre-Raphaelite meditation rooms. Both chalky buildings, with their soft curves, sun-brushed crosses and bell towers, look so peaceful in between the new architecture casting darkness down – ominous tokens of the persistent future, a place where these kinds of buildings no longer belong. Standing inside their eclipse, I looked across the street to the Borges Culture Centre and what remains of the *Sur* Office; a polished black and white sign, *Edificio Sur Viamonte 494* and below, a grey plaque mounted on rosy marble, giving a brief biography of Victoria Ocampo:

BORN OPPOSITE THE CONVENT OF
LAS CATALINAS, A CHURCH LOCATED
ON THE STREETS OF SAN MARTIN AND
VIAMONTE IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE WHERE
HER PARENTS LIVED AND OPPOSITE
THE OFFICES OF SUR.
VICTORIA OCAMPO: AUTOBIOGRAPHY
1890 – 1979
HOMAGE TO SUR AND ITS FOUNDER.

Today, this is all that remains of *Sur*. I had come across an elephant carcass in the Sahara, stripped of its tusks. Reluctantly, I took my camera out. It seemed like such a

waste to replace someone as influential as Victoria and something as important as *Sur* with a simple plaque. I stood perfectly still. The wind blew through my hair, up the crowded street, between traffic and cold concrete. My skin lifted, all the little hairs saluting. I remained transfixed on the words before me and aimed my camera to shoot. As soon as it clicked, I felt eyes burn to the left of me. They belonged to yet another security guard. Like all the others, he was not impressed by my presence or camera. Why was he so suspicious? Did I really look that threatening? I was beginning to think all security guards had it in for me. Feebly I tried raising the corners of my mouth but all friendly gestures were met with a narrowing brow and puffed out chest; a frustrated pigeon, he approached me. When I explained my intention was only to take a photo of the *Sur* sign, his stern face broke and his shoulders regained their deflated position. He told me I could take one more photo but then I would have to leave. I heard Victoria's voice around me. *The fundamental thing in a literary review conceived in the way (Sur) was is to support and defend the literary standard. There's no room for equality or charity in art. To reward a mediocre work because its author lives in difficult circumstances is inconceivable. The work is well or badly written, well or badly thought out (even though the tastes and ideas of the author may not coincide with ours. An example in my case: Jean Genet). There's no passport other than talent. Of course there are grades of talent and one cannot very well expect an unpublished Shakespeare to come along every day. But the demand for quality to which I refer is more and more resisted in the world today. It is unpopular, and that says it all.*¹⁴

She was passionate about *Sur*; she funded the magazine and when times were difficult in the seventies, she even sold some of her land and jewellery to keep it going. In

regards to the history of *Sur*, John King explains, '[In September 1929] Waldo Frank met Victoria Ocampo, after he gave a lecture at the *Amigos del Arte*. They became good friends and Frank discussed the idea of a new magazine which might fuse [Samuel] Glusberg's Americanist sympathies with the Europeanised, aristocratic cultural perspective offered by Victoria Ocampo... Two things became increasingly clear as the discussions continued. Firstly, Victoria was not at all interested in working with anybody, especially not Glusberg whom she found ideologically and socially unacceptable. The idea for a magazine would become her idea and hers alone. It was she that sailed to New York in early 1930 to visit America and continue discussions with Frank. It was her money that financed the magazine and her tastes that determined its initial orientation.'¹⁵

Both the *Sur* plaque as well as Victoria said she was born 'opposite the convent', not inside. Where? In one of what looked like dozens of empty apartments? I waited for the traffic lights to turn red. Tyres screeched to a halt. A taxi driver shook his arms in defeat. I watched a cyclist shift through the congestion. He was a messenger on a mission. I looked both ways, stuck my camera back in its case, then crossed the street.

Once inside the monastery's courtyard, the heat of fresh sunlight washed over me. Palm trees and spiralling moths filled the space with a tropical flavour. Immediately I felt safe and a million miles away from the pace of the city. A contemplative silence reached out to the pathway encircling the courtyard. Smooth tiles and pillars surrounded this secluded fortress. In the far corner of the yard, an arthritic guard with long arms and even longer ears motioned to me with his hand. He fiddled with his watch then advanced with shuffling steps. I asked him if he knew where Victoria Ocampo was born. He rubbed his nose then shook his head.

‘Espera.’ He said holding one hand up. ‘Espera aquí.’

I waited inside the guard’s alcove as he disappeared through one of the many doors. Across from me, waiters moved gracefully, unfolding chairs and umbrellas, polishing off wooden tables with the flick of a saffron towel. They placed silverware and glasses with thoughtful precision. It seemed this courtyard served not only the religious but also the hungry. My stomach grumbled. The guard reappeared with a lift in his step. A woman in a moss green suit accompanied him. She was introduced as ‘La Jefa’ and spoke perfect English.

‘Ernesto tells me you’re looking for Victoria’s birthplace.’ She kissed each of my cheeks then held onto my hand. ‘I’m not sure where Victoria was born but it could not have been in this monastery because it has been full of nuns since the 1800’s. However, Victoria’s great niece helps with mass in Santa Catalina every Monday and Wednesday afternoon. If you wanted to come back and speak with her on either day, you’re most welcome to.’ She released my hand then held her own together. Her eyes matched her suit. I took a pen and notebook from my front pocket.

‘I believe Victoria was born somewhere near the monastery.’ She looked to the restaurant. A waiter lost his concentration, dropping a knife to the shiny stones below. ‘No one is entirely sure. So much has changed since then, buildings have been destroyed, landmarks are quickly forgotten.’ She continued to hold her hands together, fingers intertwined marked by three gold rings.

‘Muchas gracias señora.’ I kissed her cheeks.

‘I look forward to seeing you again.’

* * *

Elated by my discovery, Lea's suggestion of a woman's bookshop became my next destination. *Certain books awaken us suddenly to the sense of finding a treasure that belongs to us. This is why we ingenuously cry out: "How good it is! It's exactly what I think!" This doesn't mean that one knows as much as the author. It means that there existed dormant in us – and certainly on a less intense level – thoughts and feelings that the author has had the intelligence, the passion, the power and the talent to drag out from the dark and dreamy recesses of his heart and spirit in order to explain them to himself first, and then to us.*¹⁶

I walked up Viamonte, lost in the rhythm of the dark tapered street. Mannequins draped in leather coats almost burned beneath bright shop bulbs. Shopkeepers stood beside them, in the shelter of the doorway, chain smoking. Bakery girls dressed identically in candy-cane aprons, stacked caramel covered biscuits and strawberry-filled cakes high behind burnished glass; their eyes transfixed downwards, full of secret daydreams. Well-versed vendors auctioned cowhide maps of Argentina, pink alarm clocks and semiprecious earrings to any interested pedestrian. I passed a corner shop with two old men playing chess and drinking espresso then looked up to the curves in the architecture; chrome-looped balconies, marble faces, windows shaped like underwater caves. Grilled meat and hot gusts of bus fumes were lead in my lungs. I took a fast breath then ran across the twenty rushing lanes of traffic that make up Avenida 9 de Julio.

The woman's bookshop was number 333 Avenida Montevideo, nestled between a dog-grooming parlour and wedding dress shop. My hand turned the doorknob with apprehension. A bell rattled as the door swished open. One bare light bulb dangled from the ceiling. Tobacco and dust cast a thick cloud over the books, balanced precariously in

all available corners. An enormous grey and white cat leaped out from behind the closest stack then proceeded to follow me. Her name was 'Lola'. This I gathered from the agitated woman behind the counter who continued to call her, even though she refused to come. Lola and I wandered through the aisles of this shoebox shop that was at best a cluttered maze. The stacks of books, both old and new, appeared to have some kind of order but I could not figure out what that order was. My fingers traced over cracked spines and crumbling jackets. Their disorder was comforting in its own strange sort of way.

I tried speaking with the woman behind the counter but I could hardly see her for all the books. With caution, she slid a stack aside, looked me up and down then lit a cigarette with one quick strike of a match. It hissed as she brought it towards her face. Lola jumped to the floor, disappearing behind a shelf. Casually, the woman brushed her cigarette against the ashtray. She chose a pen from the assortment in a ceramic jar then tucked it behind her ear. After two more hard drags, she lumped a tall pile of books from the floor onto the counter.

'Buenas tardes.' I said tightening the straps of my backpack. She said nothing, her cool eyes empty of emotion and colour. She lit another cigarette from the one already burning.

'Tiene libros de Victoria Ocampo o Alfonsina Storni?' I asked patiently, breaking the painful silence with words that seemed too loud and cheerful.

She pressed the end of the first cigarette against the ashtray, already full of discarded filters.

‘Aquí.’ Any interest in my presence evaporated as she took three books off the tops of the closest stacks, flicked her cigarette towards the floor then exhaled upwards. It was as if she possessed some sort of bookish magic. A reason for her quiet contemplation perhaps? I lifted the cover of the first one, *Testimonios Series sexta a décima*, gently mentioning Lea’s name. A deluge of kindness immediately radiated from behind the smoky face. She became a different person. The black-painted lines around her eyes stretched. She took my hand in hers then bent over the desk to kiss me.

‘Conocés a Lea?’ She questioned quickly, so quickly I could hardly understand. Smoke rushed from her tiny nose. It floated on air. She told me she and Lea were good friends and that Lea’s magazine was behind me. Motioning with her cigarette to a rack of pamphlets, she emphasised the literary community’s respect for Lea. How she was one of their pillars, one of their rocks. I picked up the magazine and bought it along with three other books, Victoria Ocampo’s *Testimonios Series sexta a décima*, *Victoria Ocampo* by Maria Ester Vázquez and *La otra Alfonsina* by Ana Silvia Galán and Graciela Gliemmo. The weight of these books for the next two months would be nothing compared to the insight they would give me. Besides, I already had a bag full of books. A couple more would not break my back.

By the time I got back to Vicente Lopez, the evening’s sky was flush with fiery wisps of cloud. The orange blossoms had closed for the day but their sticky perfume still mingled with the air. I felt the exhaustion of the commuters behind me as we made our way up from the train station. We passed a group of young boys waiting beside traffic lights. All were barefoot, some too young to speak. The older ones looked dreamily at the

ice cream shop beyond the rushing cars and bodies. Its flashing *Flamingo* sign tortured stomachs but tempted taste buds.

Light sprayed out from the Gardenhouse's kitchen. Petals covered the pavement and the tips of my shoes. I realised I was famished as I stood there jamming my key into the gate's cryptic lock. I fiddled with it until it turned reluctantly. The other lodgers were already out clubbing; their pockets full of pills, their heads full of potions. They had left a note for me taped to the end of the stairwell with directions to where they were going as well as various cell numbers. For some reason they liked me, even if I strayed far away from their flock.

*I am like the she-wolf.
I broke with the pack
And fled to the mountains
Tired of the plain.¹⁷*

I flung my backpack against the bottom step then sat for a moment's silence in the darkness.

The door to the back garden stood ajar; Edith sat by herself at the far end of the table. Bored, she peeled an apple into an unbroken spiral while watching TV. She was a prisoner in the Gardenhouse, not allowed to leave without permission from her young keepers; Martín and Javier. Her days were spent cleaning, her evenings moved unmarked in front of an old black and white six-inch screen. The sound of my footsteps lifted her gaze. I flipped on the overhead light switch and looked to Edith.

'Quieres Vino?' I asked as she rose from her chair. Junior meowed loudly then jumped to the counter. I scratched behind his matted ears and took a carefully hidden bottle of red wine from the cupboard. Edith looked behind her, then back to me.

‘Vino?’ She questioned. Making sure I was actually speaking to her.

‘Sí, vino tinto.’ I took an old opener from the drawer, my bag of brown rice and lentils from a plastic shopping bag above the fridge.

‘Sí Fionita.’ She smiled and as she did, her disposition changed. Her self-consciousness disappeared with the cool air as she motioned to shut the back door. It was the first time I had ever seen Edith smile. The first time I had seen her move without tension. Her hair, dark as crow’s feathers, hung loosely down the length of her back. I opened the bottle and poured each of us a glass. The plum and blackberry tannins coated my mouth and throat, melting my muscles. I could tell they were doing the same for Edith.

I asked her about the programme she was watching. She explained it was a game show for women. The participants; all single, attractive, homeless, young mothers, volunteer to have their lives filmed for a week. The public then watches their ‘real life’ clips and votes on who they feel is most worthy of the consolation prize. From Edith’s detailed description, it appeared whoever broke the most hearts and invoked the most tears, in addition to their level of stunning beauty, won the grand prize – a job as a sales clerk in a shoe shop.

‘It is good you are here,’ she took a small sip from her glass. ‘I hope you stay.’

Chapter Five

Meeting the Locals

My only ambition is to some day manage to write, more or less well, more or less badly, but as a woman.

– Victoria Ocampo

The hollow beating of drums, police in bulletproof vests and growing crowds with banners accusing the government of foul play are becoming a normal event beyond the arches of Retiro Station. Rubber bullets soar over the heads of protesters. Smoke rises from behind flashing sirens, babies cry, dented cars and buses are stunted by strings of stagnant bodies. Deciding which way to go is always difficult, but on this particular morning I ran with a woman and her child to an empty patch of street. The banging of pots and pans and the pulsating chants of protesters bounced off the glass ceiling of the station, doubling the decibels of unrest. There were television cameras outside. The mood was a mixture of caution and rage, tension and betrayal but at least, for the moment, things felt non-violent. I began to realise that among other things, the people protesting were not the ones rushing by in suits and ties. In fact, these protesters were a burden to those trying frantically to get to work on time. The protesters were not middle or upper class, as I was led to believe by news reports and a few feature articles tucked away in Western newspapers. They were from the lower classes. But had not all been affected by the fall of the peso? Where were those representatives from the upper classes? Why were they not getting involved?

I wondered about this as I made my way to the Anglo-Argentine Cultural Institute. There was a long, twisting string of people outside the building, hopeful for immigration papers to Britain.

The building dated from the seventies. Swiss cheese linoleum and ceilings in various drab shades penetrated your vision from all directions. There were English newspapers scattered across table tops, busy secretaries protected inside glass cells, stairs with aluminium panelling and an old fashioned lift with several rickety doors.

The lift repeatedly jolted on my journey up to the library. Once inside, long aisles were musty beneath the artificial light. As I stood in the doorway, wondering where to go next, an elegant woman with lightly blushed cheeks and small hoop earrings introduced herself to me as 'Sylvia', pausing at the *Syl* and emphasising the *via*. She spun circles in her chair, welcoming people who passed through the swinging front doors. When I told her I was interested in information regarding Victoria Ocampo, she turned her computer towards me, started punching keys then brought up a website with rotating pictures of Victoria's house in Mar del Plata. It was three dimensional and so realistic, as if both of us were actually standing inside the house instead of watching it move across the screen.

At first Sylvia seemed uninterested. Mechanically, she explained how the house in Mar del Plata had been so well preserved that when her friend went to visit, she found one of Victoria's perfume bottles in a dresser drawer. It was only when I explained to Sylvia that I was a writer, researching Victoria, that she threw her neck back and raised her arms to the ceiling. Her eyebrows lifted. She took hold of my wrists, looked me straight in the eye, then told me she would help me. From time to time she vanished without rhyme or reason, only to jump back in her seat and comment on the video tour.

Syl...via was obviously a woman of extremes and I was not quite sure what she planned on doing or saying next. Would I stay or have to go? Before I could decide, she picked up the phone. Like her movements, her words were rushed, staccato, seasoned with gusts of energy and static breath. The manner in which she slammed the phone into its receiver worried me, until I caught the spark in her eye.

A stunning middle-aged woman in a peach suit parted the library doors like a Hollywood legend. Her entrance washed over the bleak room with grace, calmness and just the right amount of perfume. She presented herself as 'Monica Ottino,' kissed both my cheeks then invited me upstairs to her office. Together we squeezed into the old fashioned lift. Monica pulled each door until they fastened then mentioned she too was a writer, the author of the play, *Eva y Victoria*.

Her office was warm, neat and cosy. An organised desk full of papers faced the wall, a coat rack sat in the far corner and a long window with a view cut in half by an adjacent building let in three dancing beams of afternoon light. We sipped black coffee from thin china cups and as she straightened her jacket, she spoke about *Eva y Victoria*.

'I will give you a copy the next time you visit me.' There would be a next time? I was delighted! Monica copied a phone number from her diary into my notebook, lifted her coffee cup then mentioned how Victoria was the President of the Cultural Committee at the Anglo-Argentine Institute from 1963 to 1977.

'Look here.' Monica motioned to a fading list stuck to the wall, the only decorated wall in the room then stared at the contours of my face. 'Your mother must miss you. I have two grown daughters and worry about them.' Thanking her, I slowly rose, guilty that I had already taken up too much of her time, even if I could have easily

sat with her all day. I kissed her cheeks and it felt as if Monica wanted to wrap me in her arms to protect me. 'We must meet again very soon,' she said kissing my cheeks. 'I have a few things to give you.'

The queue for immigration had not moved. People looked up from their newspapers to watch me step into the street and hail a taxi. Because I did not want to be late to meet Victoria's great niece at Santa Catalina Church, I told the driver to hurry. Unfortunately, experience gives the test first and the lesson later. He sped through the streets, up and onto pavements, dodging pedestrians, small dogs and big-wheeled buses with a semi-controlled death wish. It was as if he was blind and sensed objects only when the car brushed against them. In the midst of the ride, his story unfolded; his honours degree in Argentine Literature, reasons for driving a taxi, wife who left him and children he rarely sees. Horns honked and expressions froze in horror as we raced through the streets of Buenos Aires.

When I arrived at Santa Catalina Church, midday mass was starting, something I had never experienced before but I assumed it was not a good time for conversation. The woman in charge of the monastery next door, dressed more for selling real estate than religion, brought me into the church with a clocking pace. I have always felt distant, even a little sceptical about organised religion, but this church was different. It was intimate, warm and welcoming. Unlike other Latin American churches I have seen in the past, Santa Catalina was neither extravagant nor daunting. It was humble, down to earth instead of above it, with one simple shrine at the front and a burning candle that twitched in a tarnished silver holder. No more than a dozen worshippers sat with heads bowed in the dark wooden pews, some crying, others silent.

As the woman beside me crossed herself from head to chest then shoulder to shoulder, I stood still then followed her up the side aisle to the red room in the back. There were three dark haired women busy with their hands full of fabric, wax, bread and wine but I knew who Victoria's great niece was instantly. She looked just like an Ocampo, even from afar. The definition in her oval face, the purity of her petal skin, the confident but approachable personality drew me to this woman who even shared the dimple on her chin with her great aunt. Like Monica, she welcomed me as family. The woman who had led me there left us, re-crossing herself on the way out.

'Mucho gusto. Soy Ana Zemboráin.' She dressed in black with scarlet boots, a bun of raven hair, no make-up but the familiar intensity I have seen in so many of Victoria's photos. The padre appeared in a white robe, fringed with gold tassels. He was large man who also kissed my cheek, then spoke a few words in English to welcome me. Because Ana was helping with mass, she asked me if I could return the following afternoon so that we could spend some time together.

'Claro que sí.' I replied as we swapped numbers and farewell kisses. No one seemed to mind that I was not a Catholic in this very Catholic country.

Before going to bed, the phone rang. Edith knocked on my door in her soiled uniform, eyes desperate for want of sleep but she handed the phone to me with a sisterly smirk.

'Para tí.' She said entering the garage, shivering from the cold.

It was Ana inviting me to her mother's house for lunch. She explained that her mother, Rosita Zemboráin, was Victoria's niece, and Ana's grandmother was Victoria's

sister, Rosa. 'Fate *brought* you to me,' she hushed. 'Victoria is watching over you. She is holding your wrist. She is guiding you.'

Chapter Six

Una Fiesta

*Your winter arms protect me.
Under your tender care
I let the hours pass in lethargy
Sad and long...*

– *Alfonsina Storni, from 'Old Moon'*

Edith was told, in Martín's less than sympathetic tone, to empty the algae, mosquito larvae and thick murky water from the pool then scrub it down till it shone like topaz. It was Martín's birthday and he wanted to have a party. So, the tiny overworked woman spent the entire day hunched over on her knees; and the toilets, sinks, showers, faucets, all water-providing amenities were out of order. The struggling yard hose could never fully accomplish its task even after the guests arrived, even after I would leave the house at the end of the month. There simply was not enough water and once again, Edith's hard work went unnoticed. Irritated beyond belief I thought of Ocampo when she wrote, *As far as I'm concerned, I side with the servant, not the master.*¹⁸ But how could I stand up for Edith when this was her livelihood? When the position of the servant is as important as the duties? Her unfair treatment infuriated me and of course, no one saw or used the pool because the weather turned arctic and the pool quickly returned to its dilapidated state.

Aside from morally battling Edith's treatment and the obvious master/servant roles that seemed quite normal inside this society, I enjoyed Martín's party as well as meeting his friends. They welcomed me into their circle, giving me insight into a whole new Argentina; the twenty-something generation; a funky, thought-provoking group of well educated, polite and very kind people. I spent most of the evening talking to a

guitarist with an afro and a passion for Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poetry. He quoted me a line fitting in perfectly to our discussion of present day Argentina. 'The world is a beautiful place to be born into if you don't mind people dying all around you every day.'

Our conversation continued, despite drenching weather and various forms of blinding punch. He soon revealed how the International Monetary Fund abandoned Argentina. He scratched his afro then looked to Junior sleeping on my foot.

'In a country with only nine billion dollars in its reserves – what will become of us? This is not enough to sustain any nation for very long.' This seems to be the predominant question blistering everyone's lips. He proceeded in great detail to talk about the economic state of the country, how it ties the political, social and emotional state of Argentina together and why in twenty years or maybe just two, the hardships of today's Argentina might somehow be forgotten by the rest of the world. I listened intently to his description of *dolarización*, when Carlos Menem's government deemed the peso equal to the US dollar in 1989. Through *dolarización*, Menem hoped to bring Argentina back to the prosperity it had experienced in the 1940's.

'It was a ridiculous equivalent because it was fictitious and encouraged by those bolstering the government, the upper class,' he said vindictively. Because this went on, from the late eighties to the late nineties, the Argentine upper class as well as the middle class lived very well. They could travel throughout the world, buy expensive cars, summer flats in the beach resort of Mar del Plata, even send their children to US and European universities. The rich continued to pester, bribe and support politicians who would do whatever they needed to do to keep the peso equal to the dollar. Times were

good in the nineties but the government was quickly falling deeper into debt with the IMF from whom they borrowed 160 billion dollars.

‘If only our government had invested in their own production instead of importing everything from abroad, we would have had something to fall back on today.’ Instead, they continued to import cars, computers, clothes, books – everything from the outside world. Such are the effects of globalisation, where rich countries manipulate poor for their own profits. The government continued to borrow more money, and as the upper class were secretly warned of a possible devaluation of the peso, they quickly exchanged their pesos for dollars or transferred money to US banks well ahead of the crash in December 2001. Even the guitarist with the afro transferred all of his money into US dollars just before the crash.

Overnight, personal savings in banks, such as Lloyd’s and Citibank as well as numerous once-reputable Argentine banks, have disappeared. In some cases, seventy-five percent of personal savings have vanished and the bank will not let its customers withdraw or even transfer what is left. Accounts have been completely frozen. They are also given ridiculous rates of exchange i.e.: 1.4 pesos to the dollar when it was actually worth 3.7 today. These effects are felt in every single Argentine city, town and village. From 2000 to 2002, over 200,000 professional people fled Argentina for Europe and the United States. In the past two years Argentina has gone through a wave of nearly half a dozen Presidents who made even more mistakes than their predecessors. It was not an uncommon sight to see the Argentine President fleeing angry crowds of protesters in a military helicopter, never to be seen by his country folk again. And at the end of December 2001, the IMF took the rug out from under Argentina for defaulting on too

many loan payments. Of course this did not happen overnight. This crash was the outcome of decades of poor management, hyperinflation and corruption. These are the main reasons for the current economic crisis, the reasons for the regular protests, a new underground barter system based on an illegal currency as well as an exchange of professional trades. These are the reasons why there are entire families on the streets and cheap goods, food and accommodation for overseas tourists. What was once the richest, most literate Latin American country is no more.

Just before I left Glasgow, the BBC aired a programme, *Cry for Argentina*, which explored the Argentine barter system. The documentary followed people trading their goods or services for whatever they needed. For example, when a hairdresser needed a bag of oranges, he or she cut the orange farmer's hair for that bag. I have yet to see this system in practice, but when I questioned the guitarist, he told me that this is only happening in the North, not in Buenos Aires 'as far as I know'. He mentioned that some of his guitar students had asked him about trading for his services.

'I told them I have rent, bills and food to buy. None of those companies will barter with me so for now, I can only take cash but I don't think cash will work after the next couple of months.' Looking down, he selected a pebble then skipped it across the pool's surface. It bounced twice and the sky transformed into a waterfall.

The more I spoke with Martín's friends, the more I realised how frightened they were. None of these university-educated Argentines had job opportunities waiting for them in their futures. Most are depending on their European grandparents to be the bridge to a future far away from Argentina.

Towards the end of the evening, I found myself taking shelter from the rain on a polished stair beside Martín's sister Sabrina. Not long after our introduction, she volunteered the recent story of her dramatic escape from two kidnappers in a beaten up car.

'They watch young girls who live in this area because they know their parents have money. Then they snatch them off the street and hold them for a few days until ransom is paid. This happens nearly every day but because it's so common, the papers don't report it anymore.'

Sabrina spoke to me in English and lit one Camel Light after another. She was only twenty but the depth of the rings around her eyes made her look older. A gypsy skirt sat on the edge of her hips and her belly dangled over it. Her attitude was non-committal towards everything except vegetarianism, the only real bond between us. She had no plans for her future, her career or even life. She spoke of one disaster after another; her new boyfriend addicted to coke, her fear of living in Argentina, her reasoning behind having children.

'If I have children, I would never, ever raise them here. You know?' She gripped my knees with her hands. 'I'm studying psychology but I don't want to be a psychiatrist, not like my mother. Did you know that Buenos Aires has more psychiatrists than any city in the world?'

Her mother had introduced herself to me as Martín blew the candles out on his cake. She was not pleasant, kind or maternal. She patronised Edith beyond belief, speaking to her as if she was an incompetent, disobedient child. In her company, Edith became completely submissive, lowering her already small stature into one of a beaten

soul. To witness this power-hungry woman work a room was mortifying and I could not help but wonder about the treatment she gave to her patients. If a woman such as this was a licensed psychiatrist, how could she possibly counsel people?

Sabrina's comment brought me back to our conversation.

'Many people think these kidnappings are hyped up, blown out of proportion but they are not.' She emphasised the danger lurking in all corners of Buenos Aires and continued to pound it into my brain until I could take no more. Listening to Sabrina was like being punched. A little voice inside me insisted that if I helped myself to another drink, peace would eventually come. But she pleaded I stay; that whatever I wanted, Edith would 'fetch' it for me. She then proceeded to order Edith across the room to light her cigarette. 'See' she said with the same wink she shared with her big brother. Disgusted, I rose. Without a please or thank you, her cigarette ember crackled then burned.

Chapter Seven

Tourist or Traveller

*Traveller: this cypress which rises
a mile from your feet and in whose top
a little bird sings his love
has a delicate soul beneath its rough clothes.*

*It rises so high from the ground
to give you an immaculate vision,
for if your glance searches for its top
you will stumble, human, onto heaven.*

– Alfonsina Storni, from *'The Mercy of the Cypress'*

Travelling today has changed since the days of Ocampo and Mistral but it is not that different from the *Grand Tour* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when young, British, upper class University graduates were encouraged to travel for extended periods of time to gain 'sophistication, worldliness and social awareness'.¹⁹ Of course, young travellers or backpackers are no longer confined to British passports (or the male gender); today's backpackers are mostly white, middle class university graduates or gap year students.

What irritates me about the other 'travellers' in the house, aside from the Dutch girl, is that no one seems remotely interested in Argentina. They are only interested in partying. They might call themselves 'travellers' but they are really tourists, even holidaymakers, in disguise who want to familiarise the unfamiliar by taking 'home' with them wherever they go. 'Tourists as outsiders effect change. They are symptomatic of the economic forces that displace and violate external culture. Because they bring "home" with them, they are unable to belong to an away-from-home-culture. They can only tour it. Tourists visit the signified vantage points of designated places, realising that there is

nothing in between. They are transported to a destination through the periphery to the centre and, in the very act of being carried, they reject travel.’²⁰

The Australian has been here for nearly a week and all he’s seen is the mall, the gym and the local McDonalds. Yesterday he spent eight hours chain smoking and watching Quentin Tarantino films by himself. He closed all the blinds and curled up on the sofa with his sleeping bag. Maybe he’s depressed? I suppose it would not hurt if I was a little nicer to him but then he tends to get the wrong idea. He’s easily encouraged. Say ‘hello’ or ‘how are you’ and he thinks he’s scored.

And the English guy – well, he’s the type of guy that would have been picked on in school; the awkward boy who you felt sorry for. Maybe he feels he’s been in his cocoon for long enough. A frosted Mohawk has replaced his simple haircut, his eyebrow has recently been pierced by a small dagger and he wears his new four-hundred dollar Versace jacket everywhere, regardless of temperature or time of day. This, in addition to a strange gold medallion swinging brightly from his neck makes you wonder if all the drugs he’s been consuming while in Buenos Aires are beginning to take their toll.

The Californian spends his days locked in his room with protein shakes and a laptop. He’s writing a pornographic novel, which will probably sell millions. He tells me how he was thrown out of two Hebrew schools for trying to get the entire teaching staff fired. When I ask him why, he tightens his bare stomach, flexes his biceps and tells me his father is a rabbi.

‘A rabbi?’

‘Yes, a rabbi. And he’s been married three times. His most recent wife is five years older than me. I have fifteen half brothers and sisters.’

The Dutch girl is finally getting ready to leave the country (she has been in the Dali room all this time) but is having problems reuniting with her boyfriend, the Peruvian bodybuilding farmer. Because of his lack of finances, she will have to wire money to him through Western Union in order for him enter the country. But the problems will not end there. The laws against Peruvians travelling to Argentina are severe, as the Argentine Government believes any Peruvian trying to come into Argentina is doing so to work illegally. Papers have to be signed, forms have to be filled out, bribes need to be made. I have a feeling this is only the beginning of their love story.

When I think of love stories, I think of Victoria. She was married once, to a man named Luis Bernardo de Estrada. Theirs was an ill-matched union from the start, one which she immediately regretted. Instead, true love came to her through her husband's cousin, a lawyer named Julian Martínez. Not long after their paths crossed, they began an intimate affair that lasted several years. *That evening we spent an hour lying in bed. Our bodies understood one another. We had nothing to teach them. I doubt that other bodies have ever had greater understanding, greater pleasure in becoming intimate with one another and with more tenderness to lavish when their desire was satisfied and fading away. We desired each other far beyond desire, not only for those fleeting moments. Just to look at one another, to hold hands, to feel together the warmth of fire, everything was happiness...*²¹ Out of respect for her parents Victoria kept her separation from Estrada quiet. She did not divorce him until over a decade later (Argentine law and society forbade it); however, her passionate affair with Julian, even after it ended, stayed with her until she died.

Much like Victoria, Alfonsina's love life was adventurous and untraditional for her time. On her relationship with the father of her child she proclaimed, *I would never have made him my husband. My passion and the truth in my heart were too strong. I loved a man for himself alone, without worrying about his intelligence, his social status, his background, or his education. I loved him innocently, without thinking about myself, and I threw all caution to the winds. That is the only way an honest woman can justify having a lover.*²² Alfonsina loved as she lived, by her own rules and with both sleeves rolled up. How can you not admire a woman with her unyielding courage?

Chapter Eight

Red Boots

It was as if we had met on a desert island. She began a regular interrogation, quizzing me about apparently insignificant things...

– Victoria Ocampo writing about her meeting with Virginia Woolf

Taking the day to myself, I finally changed to a room upstairs and sorted out a few hitches in my overly casual wardrobe. Because the Californian guy left to search for a girlfriend in the North, I had the opportunity to move from the garage into his room, which unfortunately had the lingering essence of porn. An incense stick, psychedelic scarf, stack of feminist books, photographs of R. and my family as well as a jar of wild flowers quickly changed that. The room was sufficient with a single bed, closet, broken TV and paint-splattered stool that was supposed to be a bedside table. There were wooden shutters on the windows, bare walls, a creaking fan that spun unevenly from the ceiling and a mirror hanging on the back of the door.

Because I wanted to travel light I had packed basic clothes, which were not appropriate for meeting the locals with their elegance and true European style. It was vital that I buy a pair of shoes that were not sandals, a top that was not a t-shirt and a pair of trousers made from material other than denim. After unpacking, I ventured to the only street famous for solving such predicaments, the street Victoria believed to be ‘narrow’ and ‘ugly’ upon her return from Europe but a street that would hopefully solve my dilemma: Calle Florida.

Like most of the locals, I was now taking buses instead of trains. Not only were they cheaper and more spacious but the duration of the journey into the centre of the city was twice as long, a journey I easily filled by reading Alfonsina's poetry.

*I am being consumed by life,
wasting, not doing anything,
between the four symmetrical
walls of my house.*

*Oh, workers! Bring your picks!
Let my walls and roof fall,
let air move my blood
let sun burn my shoulders.*

*I am a twentieth century woman.
I spend my day lounging,
watching, from my room,
how a branch moves.*

*Europe is burning,
and I'm watching its flames
with the same indifference
with which I contemplate that branch.*

*You, passer-by, don't look me
up and down; my soul
shouts its crime aloud, yours
hides its under words.²³*

The depth of the blue above me was oceanic. I made my way back to that familiar street where shop windows seduce with smooth well-lit merchandise. Calle Florida felt like a carnival, only suede heels replaced popcorn, cashmere sweaters became candyfloss and heavy leather jackets were the spinning cups. Proprietors forced business cards into my hand, promising massive discounts, dragging me unwillingly by the wrist into their silent caves lacking customers and ringing tills. I had to fight to keep to my path of beautiful pedestrians, begging gypsies and ice cream wonderlands.

After zipping up my new red boots, I went to a busy corner café for something to eat. Che Guevara once said, ‘homesickness starts with food’ and when I looked at the menu, I realised how right he was. My vegetarian choices were limited to two: a cheese empanada or a salad. I ordered the latter from a seasoned waiter neatly dressed in a starched shirt and vest. His eyes were searching but his demeanour distant. I also ordered a coffee, needing something to fuse with the heat in my bones and bring me back to the living world. The coffee came with a little chocolate-laced biscuit and shot glass of sparkling water. Pleasantly surprised by the enormous bowl of lettuce, olives, carrots, cucumbers, bamboo shoots, tomatoes and cubed cheese, along with a basket of assorted rolls, I raised my fork and dived in. Food in Argentina is not complicated; the selection comes down to grilled meat, meat sandwiches, breaded meat, salad or doughy pastries oozing with cheese. Rich desserts seem to be where their culinary interests lie. Argentineans do not like spicy food nor do they appear to like much variety. The simpler and for the most part, bloodier, the better.

I started reading María Esther Vázquez’s biography. What caught my attention, aside from the rise of Victoria’s life as well as the old black and white photographs, was the relationship Victoria shared with Virginia Woolf. Victoria deeply admired, even worshiped, Woolf and the fact that she not only lived in a different hemisphere but also on a different continent, did not stop Victoria from befriending this famous woman of letters. In Woolf, Victoria saw certain aspects of her mother and felt Woolf understood her better than anyone else. It was no coincidence that Victoria had ‘bumped into’ Woolf at Man Ray’s photography exhibition in London, in November 1934; from that moment on, Victoria pursued Woolf’s friendship, making a point of visiting her each time she

travelled to England. At Woolf's residence on Tavistock Square, they would talk about literature for hours and Victoria often confessed to feeling guilty for stealing so much of Woolf's precious time. Victoria regularly sent Woolf presents, the most memorable being mounted butterflies, which perpetuated Woolf's romantic vision of South American life. Victoria also sent Woolf copies of her work; however, Woolf never managed to read any of it. Their relationship was unequal at best and eventually broke down in the summer of 1939 when Victoria brought Gisèle Freund to Woolf's home to photograph her. Because Woolf hated being photographed (unlike Victoria), she felt Victoria's actions were not only deceptive but malicious. Woolf committed suicide before Victoria could salvage their relationship, but in the devoted eyes of Victoria, Woolf remained one of her closest friends.

* * *

Hammers and drills rattled through the air, stretching out over the city; tranquil despite all the pounding. I stared at an inky band of sky as I dressed for the day, marvelling at its purity and watery complexion. Ana, Victoria's great niece, had told me to meet her at the Santa Catalina Church and from there we would take a taxi to her mother's house in the Recoleta.

Entering the church, music wrapped around me like a blanket. Ana and another woman sang from an empty middle pew. To accompany their duet, Ana plucked an acoustic guitar and the chords dipped down through my ears, into the marrow of my bones. All sorts of sad memories flooded over me, joyful ones too. Enchanted, I took a seat at the back.

A few bodies peppered the scene but for the most part, this Wednesday mass was empty: probably a regular occurrence but the lack of an audience did not bother the entertainers. They sang as if all the pews were full. Once the song ended, people dispersed, the candles were blown out and Ana found me to kiss my cheeks, still dressed in black with her red boots and matching bag.

We hailed a taxi, Ana pointed to Victoria's birthplace across the street from the monastery, as we flew through the streets. Ana mentioned she was a lawyer and had practised for five years then given it up because she did not like arguing. She just could not decide who was right, her client or the other guy. Now she writes poetry on bits of torn paper, crumpled inside various pockets.

The taxi stopped at the corner of Avenida Callao and Guido. Ana led me into an elaborate building, through two sets of vanilla doors with giant gold rings for handles, a lobby full of marble, mirrors and freshly cut lilies. As I casually admired my surroundings, I was suddenly struck with horror. In all of my excitement and anticipation, I had forgotten to bring a bottle of wine for lunch. The colour went from my face to my eyes. I had to keep it together and think of something that would save me. *Act normal*, I continued to repeat internally. *What an idiot! What would I do?*

Ana looked at me then my new shoes and smiled, commenting on them and how they were very '*Argentinean*'. Her tone was so laid back it was horizontal. She calmed me down without even knowing it. Every problem has a solution and this one would too. I'd just have to figure out what it was.

We took the old lift with mirrored walls up to the ninth floor. The ride took an eternity. I kept thinking about the forgotten wine. Ana fiddled with a scrap of paper I

assumed to be her latest poem. When the lift ground to a halt, Ana opened the door and a voice called out in perfect English from a back room.

‘I’m in here...’ Rosita stepped out of the bedroom like Lauren Bacall. She was a distinguished woman dressed in black like her daughter, with dark Christian Dior sunglasses, big diamonds hanging from her ears, smooth auburn hair domed to perfection, blushed skin and plum washed lips. She kissed my cheeks, then her daughter’s.

‘Welcome,’ she said in a big, raspy voice. ‘I am Rosita’ rolling the ‘R’ as if it were too hot for her mouth. ‘Ana has told me all about you.’ Overwhelmed by her presence, I followed her into the luminous lounge, boot heels clicking.

The apartment was anything but ordinary and just as I would have imagined Victoria’s. It had hardwood floors, mirrors on the far wall reflecting priceless artwork, dozens of framed photographs, hundreds of leather bound books, silver, ashtrays, wilting lilies and windows that reached from ceiling to floor.

‘Let me show you my garden...’ Rosita spoke as if she was in a Shakespearean play, leading me through the dining room surrounded by even more mirrors, silver and a dangling crystal chandelier. The three of us stepped out on to the patio where clusters of healthy plants overfilled their pots. I had to squint from the glare of the sunlight and the shock of the view from the balcony. We had a three hundred and sixty degree view of Buenos Aires.

Slowly, we drifted back to the lounge.

‘Come sit, sit here and what would you like to drink?’

Ana interrupted ‘Wine?’ (Reiterating what I had indeed forgotten. I felt terrible.)

‘Or,’ Rosita suggested, ‘Juice or water?’

‘Wine.’ Ana said again. ‘Is red okay? With or without ice?’

The layered questions came quickly. Red wine with ice sounded odd but I was willing to try it.

‘I can only drink red wine with ice during the hotter months.’ Rosita confessed as she rang a bell and immediately, a uniformed maid brought out a tray with three glasses of iced red wine. Rosita continued to wear her sunglasses indoors. I would never see the colour of her eyes.

Settling into our seats around the coffee table, wilting lilies were quickly snapped from their stems by Rosita’s sharp nails. She admitted it was too early to throw them out. As mother and daughter shared a cigarette, smoke filled the heat of the room lingering in silver sheets. Without much encouragement on my part, Rosita began explaining that Rosa Ocampo was her mother and how everyone was terrified of Victoria. After taking another long drag, Rosita admitted that Victoria was so big she could do whatever pleased her. Slowly Rosita rose, elegantly exhaling the last of the smoke in her lungs, to show me a portrait of Victoria beneath an enormous wide brimmed hat with a feather. The simple detail, thin lines and soft features captured an innocent Victoria in her early twenties.

‘This was drawn in Paris,’ Rosita proudly exclaimed. ‘She signed it at the bottom.’ I looked to the faded handwriting. The inscription to Rosita remained, but the message had nearly disappeared. According to Rosita, she was Victoria’s favourite niece and inherited a pair of pearl earrings from her. Although she was not wearing them, I was shown a photograph of Victoria in the earrings, a photograph I recognised because it was

on the cover of numerous Ocampo biographies. This photograph preceded the unveiling of a series of Victoria artefacts; articles from *La Nación* printed just over two years ago and an old British edition of *Sur* with the Union Jack on the cover which included essays on various English authors from Virginia Woolf to Graham Greene. Somehow I had stepped into this dreamlike museum of Victoria Ocampo.

Rosita told me how proud Victoria was of her when, at forty, she started a career in the film industry. With real gusto, she explained that her film *La Tregua (Truce)* had been nominated for an Academy Award. Recounting the steps she took in getting there, she started with her children.

‘I had five girls,’ she said with a somewhat exhausted sigh. ‘But when I turned forty, I began to have a lot of free time on my hands.’ Regularly tasting from her glass, she went on to explain that a female friend of hers in the film business offered her a position and after much deliberation, Rosita accepted. Because she had decorated her home, did her own make-up, hair and shopping, Rosita believed those aspects of movie making could not really be that different. Quickly, she learned this was not the case and confessed how, at the beginning of her career, she was very naïve.

‘I would walk across the set while they were filming! The director and crew would throw their hands up in the air.’ After a while she gained expertise, which eventually crossed over into the theatre. She emphasised how she was ‘the best in the business’ and that at first, men patronised both her and her colleague, Tita Tamames, because they were women. The strange thing was that Rosita never told me exactly what she did for these films or plays, only that she was ‘the best’ (later I learned she was a producer). Because I was in her home, because I was a guest, I did not want to pry or

make her feel uncomfortable. I wanted her stories to flow naturally. I wanted her to feel free to offer up any information she was willing to give. In truth, I did not really know what I was doing but everyone needs to start somewhere. Playing it by ear seemed the right way to go about things, the best way to learn.

As Rosita became more involved with her career, she admitted she began neglecting her family.

‘I was with them all the time before I made movies.’ On the opposite end of the sofa Ana sat with the cigarette in hand, silently disagreeing. She shook her head, reached for the ashtray then disappeared to the bathroom. The lock on the door almost echoed. While she was gone, Rosita leaned over and whispered into my ear.

‘You know, my career was almost like a lover. It made me forget everything – my family, husband, dinner... I was almost divorced because of it. My husband never wanted me to work. He wanted me to stay at home and be with the children.’

Her Chanel no. 5 lingered on my skin and in my nose as if it were my own. I do not know if it was what she said or how she said it but I felt connected to Rosita. Perhaps I could not understand the penthouse or the servants, the make-up or movies but I understood her.

Once Ana returned, Rosita again rang the bell and we wandered into the dining room for lunch. It was nearly four o’clock. The table was set with three kinds of glasses and five rows of silver cutlery. Rosita took her seat at the head of the table. Ana and I faced each other. When the topic of vegetarianism came up, which it notoriously does during a meal with any vegetarian in non-vegetarian company, Rosita stated her dislike of ‘beef’ as she extinguished her final, pre-meal cigarette. All the while, her eyes were on

me. Her mannerisms reminded me of my Russian grandmother, only in her middle years – the conviction and emphasis on so many things, especially on her love of ‘chicken and fish’. Ana proudly declared her enjoyment of all foods.

‘I’m like Victoria – I love to eat!’ And on cue, the maid came out with a variety of platters; salad with peeled tomatoes, avocado, radishes and lettuce, scrambled eggs mixed with onion, zucchini and garlic, strips of chicken breaded and fried, as well as a sliced buttered baguette. *‘I love fattening things and I’m not afraid of gaining weight,’ Adrienne (Monnier) said. And I answered, ‘Even if you were, what difference would it make? I am afraid, and that spoils everything but prevents nothing. Attrition is not contrition. The conversation during the meal must have centred on ‘to eat or not to eat’ which is so intimately linked with ‘to be or not to be’ and can precipitate the ‘not to be’ as much by excess as by want.’*²⁴

An introduction to the maid never surfaced. Politely, I smiled and thanked her after each course but my actions were somehow out of place. She seemed invisible. No one spoke to her except through commands and a few requests. Again, I felt my allegiance reaching towards the servant.

With a gust of energy, Rosita told me I must try her daughter’s *dulce con leche*.

‘It’s from the country,’ she explained with a ring of the bell. An old coffee jar full of brown indistinct sauce, soon appeared. We all plunged a fork into the jar and spun it around until the *dulce con leche* stuck to the prongs. The sweet buttery desert coated my taste buds with a decadent flavour – rich and smooth but also crunchy and light. It had a caramel-like consistency, pure heaven to all of my senses. And when I believed I could swallow no more, a large bowl of strawberry ice cream and dark espresso appeared

before me. I continued to eat dutifully, even if the waistband on my new black trousers was stretched to its limit.

Our conversation turned towards Silvina Ocampo, Victoria's younger sister, a poet, who Rosita admitted she liked more than any of her other aunts.

'Silvina was crazy and not as beautiful as Victoria because she had a big nose. But her husband was handsome and that is very important in a man.' Rosita led me to her bookshelf where photographs of her five daughters and many grandchildren stood proudly on display. The apple of her eye, however, seemed to be her son-in-law in New York.

'He's a very famous painter who did the portraits of David Rothschild's children,' she boasted, then opened a magazine to the pages of his work.

I wanted more on Victoria and tried swaying the conversation in her direction. Rosita caught on quickly and began with her appearance.

'When Victoria was young she was very thin but when she was older, she was fat and that combined with her height and stern, determined nature made her very intimidating. She loved eating a lot of food – for example, she adored *dulce de leche* on pancakes and when someone would ask her how many she could eat at a sitting, she would say twenty-five. And she would eat twenty-five pancakes!'

The pancake story encouraged another one. Rosita remembered that when she was young her family had lived with Victoria in her house in Mar del Plata. Rosita's father did not like Victoria because he thought her explosive temper was a bad influence on his wife Rosa. The example Rosita gave me was when they were children playing with sacks of water and one burst on the floor. Victoria erupted into flames at the accident, causing

Rosita's father to accuse her of not liking his children. In retort, Victoria flung a fresh plate of food against the wall. Apparently, her patience with children was limited. Rosita remembered being told off by Victoria's personal maid Fani for playing too loudly beneath her bedroom window, because she 'might' wake Victoria up from her afternoon nap. In everyone's eyes, Victoria was the eldest sister and Queen of the house. Perhaps Rosita's father felt a power struggle with Victoria in Mar del Plata? The last straw came when Victoria's various lovers began tip-toeing into her bedroom late at night. Rosita's father had finally had enough and uprooted his family at three in the morning. They never stayed with Victoria again. According to Rosita, Victoria did what she pleased and no one would tell her otherwise.

'You must speak with my cousin Dolores.' Ana said as she brushed invisible threads from her trousers, flicking ashes and more fallen lily petals into the provided trays. Ana spoke over her mother, in order to get a word in. 'She has a key to the house in San Isidro. Otherwise, it's locked.' She wrote Dolores's number down in my notebook. Rosita followed quickly with the number of another woman who might be able to help.

'China Zorrilla is an actress and knows all about Victoria. She played Victoria in the film *Cuatro Caras para Victoria* as well as the play *Eva y Victoria* and will be of great help to you. I will call her now and tell her to expect your call.' The maid had stopped cleaning dishes in the kitchen to draw the blinds. Ana lit another cigarette. My eyes drifted towards the bookshelf, spines and titles frayed at the edges.

Rosita picked up the rotary phone and motioned to her daughter for the cigarette. It was handed over reluctantly. Rosita's fingers turned the numbers over, counting down until there was action. Through this one-sided conversation, Ana and I watched for

reactions. Rosita held the receiver tightly, her mouth moved up and down along with her free hand. Ana broke our spell of voyeurism by inquiring when she and I would meet next. She asked like an old friend and I felt as if I had known her for years. There was a comfort between us, as if we were renewing a relationship already solid from the past.

‘Soon.’ I promised, feeling the beginning of a blister form on my heel.

Showing me the dimple on her chin, Ana fell into the sofa cushions then proceeded to fiddle with her lighter. Rosita inhaled the last of their cigarette, insisting that I must also speak with Barney Finn, the director of the film, *Cuatro Caras para Victoria*.

‘This is his number.’ She dictated to me from her diary bound in pink ribbons.

I thanked them for everything and as I rose, thought it best not to mention my mistake of forgetting wine. I would make it up to them, already envisioning dozens of perfect thank you gifts.

Chapter Nine

Victoria

Dante's soul is a kindred spirit of my soul. I feel full of talent, of intelligence, of love that I would like to communicate. I was born to do great things that I'll never do, because of an excess of everything.

– Victoria Ocampo

Looking for Victoria's old apartment at the junction of Viamonte and Florida, put the present state of Argentina in perspective. My surroundings consisted of a man sleeping in a wheelchair with a sign around his neck asking for help. There was a mother taking shelter beneath the glare of a McDonald's sign, rocking her baby on the front of her calves. She was too tired to beg for money. Not far from her, a father strummed a guitar while his son plucked a harp, both completely lost inside their music. I stood in my silence, digging deep in my pocket for coins, moving out of the way of a janitor and his broom, away from the tide of the crowd that continued to overlap and multiply.

From the serenity of an abandoned doorframe, I stared up at what was once Victoria's apartment. Today a newer, shinier model has replaced it but the three original surrounding buildings remain in their colonial delicacy; white shutters, curving balconies and dome sloped rooftops connected by antennas and tangled wires. I tried to imagine Victoria opening up one of the shutters, looking down onto the shoppers passing below. *You can't go up on the rooftop on Florida and Viamonte without special permission and without holding someone's hand. The little stairway up to it is narrow and dark. But when the door opens it's dazzling. There's so much light and so much sky! So much*

*space! Below, you can see the patios, and the neighbours' patios too. But they won't let you get near the edge to have a good look...*²⁵

I decided to visit the La Recoleta Cemetery (known as the Cementerio General del Norte until 1949) and Victoria's grave. I would search the streets of Buenos Aires for footprints of Victoria and her final resting-place seemed appropriate. The tree-lined street of Posadas led me there in a zig zagging route from Retiro Station. The street, near Rosita's apartment, was peaceful, marked only by a few pedestrians, flower stalls and black BMWs moving like panthers through the towers of stretched shadows.

The entrance to the cemetery was grey and grand but in dire need of repair. Old artists sold their crafts beyond the gates. Semi-precious rings, wooden puzzles, tie-dye dresses and leather nick-nacks were cheap for the few roaming tourists. Sorbet-coloured swatches of fabric covered stone footpaths; resting upon them, home-made cakes went for fifty centavos a slice.

When I passed through the entrance, I stepped into a courtyard full of erupting roots, cigarette ends and enormous tombs that looked more like small homes than resting places for the dead. Argentine novelist Martín Cullen once described El Cementerio de la Recoleta as 'a Palladian miniature of the city, with illusional vistas' and it is true. Overwhelmed by the size of things, I took a step back.

The Recoleta is the place where all the affluent porteños are buried but I had no idea tombs could actually stand this tall. The intricate crosses, grief-stricken statues, chiselled doors and poetic plaques reached up to the sun through long detailed spires. From Mitre to Alvear, Sarmiento to Estrada, the most influential and wealthiest rest here. But it is not only the deceased who call this place home. Hundreds of feral cats recline

like ladies in a brothel over these, as Thomas Hutchinson once observed, 'gorgeous monuments of marble'.

Asking the guard for directions to the Ocampo tombs, he looked surprised. In Spanish he explained how most visitors come to see Evita's tomb but not Ocampo's. Following the guard over a shifting concrete path, cracked and flea ridden, he asked me where I was from. *Wasn't I also one of those looking for refuge? Men and women who suffer from the desert of America because we still carry Europe inside us, and who suffer from suffocation in Europe because we carry America inside us. Exiles from Europe in America; exiles from America in Europe. A little group disseminated from the North to the South of an immense continent and afflicted with the same sickness, the same nostalgia, that no change of place would definitively cure.*²⁶ With much twisting and turning inside the labyrinth without any real beginning or end, we arrived at the burial site, resting in a pool of sunshine.

The sandy coloured plot was stained by years of harsh weather. Great gashes of darkness bled through each of the stones. Large cement crosses and snapdragon lanterns punctured the sky. Massive towers surrounded the cemetery, their reflective exteriors once again contrasting with this antique pocket locked in time. The irony of the tombs of Victoria and her family inundated by feral cats somehow represented the common ground of past and present Argentina as well as a new found meeting of classes. It was bizarre to see such compacted collision of people and place.

As the shards of light began to fade from her plaque onto her father's, I sat beside her name. It felt as if I was underwater. A tender quietness consumed me. A gentle breeze brushed over my hands and I wondered what Victoria would speak of if she were

young today. *Men and women – I repeat, and women – have never achieved anything great without heroism. That I know. But heroism is applicable to so many things that don't have to do with war (the word has finally come out), to so many things that don't deal with what Marinetti calls 'the aesthetic of war in all its splendour of individuals, masses, terrestrial and aerial machines, in all its stimulation of the most luminous human virtues.'* One can, one must be ready to die – and even to live – for certain ideas such as the patria. Those ideas are the patria.²⁷

* * *

On my way to meet Andrew at the *Buenos Aires Herald*, I got caught in the middle of another protest. All streets were closed around the Plaza del Congreso and moving past this historical centre was anything but easy. 'The Kilómetro Cero [Kilometre Zero] is the point from which all road distances from Buenos Aires are measured (the longest route is 3,390 km to Bahía Lapataia on the Chilean border).'²⁸ Among other things, this is where all political buildings reside, where protesters gather, second only to La Plaza de Mayo.

In the middle of the Plaza del Congreso a copy of Rodin's bronze *The Thinker* sits, hunched over and greening from years of wet weather. Contemplating in silence, he brings temporary serenity to this hot patch of city. In addition to *The Thinker* there is another sculpture; one of a man suspended inside a dry pond. The man, holding an oar, is there to represent the River Plate but without the water flowing through his fingers, the statue half-heartedly fulfils its metaphorical purpose.

Behind the statue, the Palacio del Congreso sits like a hungry lion, claws sharp, mane shining. Completed in 1906, its regal copper dome, bone white columns, river-like steps, ubiquitous statues and windows show why it cost twice its original budget to build.

It is a mirror image of the US Capitol in Washington DC, with a façade not encouraging but oppressive. In all its eminence and wealth, it slaps the poor in the face every time they look at it. They become more aware of where their hard-earned money goes, how it is squandered, where it is wasted.

Vendors sold candied peanuts, people carried flags and an old man on the back of a truck with a megaphone spoke wildly to an isolated crowd beyond the Plaza. Police made their presence known as they waited for the chaos to kick off, licking strawberry ice cream that dripped onto their bulletproof vests. Eventually realising I was on the wrong street, I hailed a taxi, this time driven by a thin old man who told me of his three daughters.

‘When they are old enough, I want them to leave Argentina so they have a future. Argentina has no future for the young any more. It is no longer a country.’ All I could do was listen to this man who was completely drained of hope. Only desperate times force a father to send his children away.

Like an incompetent fool, I arrived at *The Herald* just as Andrew and his friend, John Fernandez, were leaving. Andrew told me not to worry but that he had an appointment with a photographer on the other side of town, so we would have to cut our meeting short. John tried making me feel better by saying ‘in Argentina everyone is late’ but I still felt awful. Maybe they could tell? They listened sympathetically while I described the protest, my misspelling of the street name and how I got lost because of it.

We walked to a café just around the corner from *The Herald* and the stress of the day quickly faded. The open windows let in a cool breeze, a TV in the corner jumped

with news flashes and the three of us took our seats in the empty venue smelling of chocolate.

Andrew did look like Hemingway. His white hair and beard gave him a sense of both authority and wisdom. His English accent had not lost intonation or charm. He took out a handkerchief to brush his brow and I marvelled at his presence. Belying his position at the paper, he was casually dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt with a blazer unbuttoned and well worn. His demeanour commanded attention as he ordered three coffees then leaned over on his elbows to get serious about the conversation that was about to begin. Both Andrew and John were revved up about politics, so heated that any attempt at interjection on my part was nearly impossible, so I listened. The waiter placed the coffees, shot glasses of sparkling water and biscuits with *dulce de leche* on the bare table. As the open doors and windows drew in a gust of fresh air, they began to terrify me about life in Argentina.

‘Eighty-five policemen have been killed this year because the criminals have figured out how to shoot a man in a bulletproof vest. They just aim for the face.’ Andrew drank his coffee in three gulps then pushed the water and biscuits aside. ‘My friends take off their jackets and ties before driving home at night to dissuade anyone interested in attacking businessmen. They call their wives before leaving the office and if they are not home within the hour, then their wives know they’ve gone missing and immediately call the police. Kidnappings happen all the time and are spontaneous. Women are told not to wear their jewellery anymore. You should be staying in the centre of town because it is safer when you go home at night. A wealthy suburb is the wrong place to be living right now.’

At that precise moment in time I wanted to flee the country, return to my safe Scottish life, turn off the lights and hide under the bed.

‘To have an honest interpretation of Buenos Aires, you need to see the smelly part of town,’ Andrew said. He stood up, put money on the table, buttoned his blazer and pushed his chair forward. ‘I’ll arrange a lunch at my house for next week. Then you will understand.’ John and I watched Andrew leave the café then John offered to give me a little tour of the area.

We walked along the silent dusty streets, past scaffolding and half-built apartments lying like fallen soldiers. Eventually we found a Parisian styled esplanade. Swans, ducks and starlings cooled themselves in the murky green water. With ruffled feathers, they dived for food. John told me how the docklands were once under construction to become the most elite part of the city but when the money ran out, the project collapsed. I looked around me. It was as if a bomb had fallen, only no one else knew. I had to blink a few times to make sure I was seeing things clearly.

As we moved on, John took a series of photographs, adjusting the lens of his camera, changing filters, checking for the perfect angle of light. He told me he was creating a website on the area. John was nothing like Andrew. He dressed for the heat in shorts, socks and sandals, was medium build and of Indian descent. He saw the world through his camera; it was his third eye. When I asked him how he came to live in Buenos Aires, he threw the camera strap around his neck.

‘I arrived here twenty-two years ago on a tourist’s visa, took one look at the city, the sky, and resolved never to return to India. A friend told me I could get a job at the British newspaper, so went to *The Herald* and they gave me my first job. After that, I

went freelance. This has been my home for a very long time. Besides, I don't have any money left and there's nowhere else for me to go now, even if I wanted to leave.'

He pointed up to the street sign above us. It read, *Victoria Ocampo*. 'All of the streets in this area are named after famous Argentine women.' His camera clicked and we strolled to the end of promenade.

Passing beneath the highway ramp, we stumbled over broken glass, stones and railroad tracks. We were heading towards the warehouse part of town. Empty buildings, broken windows, rotting wood and bold musical murals lined the streets reeking of beer and bodies. There was smoke coming from a bin box. A group of young men watched John and me carefully, causing the two of us to grow overly aware of our steps. We pressed on at a faster pace until we came to a region called La Boca. Tango dancers performed on nearly every corner, prismatic homes and even more perilous groups of young men lingered behind them. I wondered how safe it was for both of us to be here; John with his socks and camera, me with my out of sync style. But we carried on through to San Telmo, the artists' quarter, up a steep hill where an old Russian church, onion-domed and golden, stands shining like buried treasure.

'Several years ago,' John explained as we stopped for a rest, 'a ship full of Russian sailors docked in La Boca and the men refused to leave. The church took them in and fed them until eventually, they ran out of food. The Russians left and took to the streets where they got lost until their ship set sail without them.' I wondered if that Russian fisherman I had met in the Plaza del Mayo was one of those men.

We walked until we found a bus stop that would take me back to Retiro Station. The cobble paths and dangling laundry framed us as a bus rattled up the street. John gave

me his card then invited me to lunch at his home at the weekend. I accepted the invitation and stepped onto the bus, already rolling away without me.

‘Saturday.’ I heard him say from the street corner. ‘Noon.’ The bus jerked forward and the sun began to set at the edge of the avenue, sliding down over faces, rooftops and trees.

* * *

Recoleta’s artisan market is a wonderland of a place. It is full of hippies, even more hippies than San Francisco boasts, with beads, baskets, silkscreen paintings, leather purses, Tarot card readers, Peruvian chess sets, masks, embroidered bikinis, incense sticks, home made cakes, animal hide drums, finger pianos, live music and lots of young, pregnant women. The friendliness of the strangers I met amazed me. One guy with dreadlocks who was selling guitars, flutes and pipes, invited me to spend the day with his friends and their musical ensemble. We spoke for a while about music then he gave me his card.

The day made me feel alive; the River Plate shimmered in the sunlight, music echoed through the kaleidoscope park. I watched two US tourists, eyeing an older artist’s paintings from his tiny three-walled stall. They sneered, poked and prodded then left without even a ‘Buenas tardes or gracias’. I could see he was hurt by their disregard so I told him I liked his work, which I did, then bought a painting. It was a small, red tie-dyed silk screen with various shaped hands and patterns. I told him I was writing a book, influenced by Argentine and Chilean literary heroines; of course, he knew all about Victoria and Alfonsina. Everyone here seems to know something about literature.

Across the street from the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes lay Plaza Francia. Empty of people but full of pigeons this wide flush column of sculptures, symbols and significance lives in the darkness of an unattractive block of flats. Four bronze lampposts spray light towards the statues' faces, ripe with determination. The highest standing statue holds a torch; the surrounding four keep watch in folds of drapery that hang like cloth instead of marble. The carved inscription reads, *Homage de la Colonie Francaise a la Nation Argentina 1810-1910*. Much like the Torre de los Ingleses Monument, Plaza Francia celebrates the centennial of the Argentine Revolution tipping its hat this time, not to the English, but the French.

It was here at Plaza Francia, in 1944, that Victoria met with her fellow female comrades to celebrate the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation. Their commemoration, however, was violently extinguished by the police. This incident occurred just prior to Perón's Presidency, when politically active (and aware) women were an abomination to the Argentine government. Although life changed for women with Perón's government, (they were given the right to vote in September 1947), it was not entirely for the better. Perón's oppressive tactics sent many into political exile. He had innocent citizens tortured, spied upon, gagged and imprisoned. Juan Domingo Perón might have called for the suffrage of Argentine women but Victoria knew why: he wanted their votes.

I have never involved myself in what is popularly called politics. And if I were to – something that is not among my aptitudes or inclinations – it would be to maintain that things relegated, as it were, to the region of abstract morality must become an immediate part of politics for the salvation of a world devastated by the greed of some and the

*apathy of others; by violence and lies and satanic pride in its various disguises: that of totalitarianism, for example, with no exceptions. They must become part of politics through the mediation of women who would not sanction any other concerns, weapons or strategies.*²⁹

Throughout Perón's regime Victoria was harassed and threatened but in May 1953 she spent twenty-six days in Buen Pastor, the prison for women in San Telmo, for publishing the writings of communists, fascists and Nazis (indifferent to the authors' lives, she focused solely on their work) as well as being a rich, upper class intellectual. Years later she would look back on her time spent in prison with a certain warmth for it was there that she met a colourful spectrum of women, particularly political prisoners and prostitutes, whom she would not have crossed paths with otherwise. She shared a cell with these women and they made a powerful impact on her; with them she felt a strong sense of sisterhood, and although the actual prison experience was by no means pleasant – the mattresses were uncomfortable, the food was tasteless, prisoners were not allowed reading or writing material (although a few were secretly given bibles) and the cells were cramped – she learned a lot about herself. Perón was ruthless in his crusade to put Victoria behind bars but Victoria and her friends did not give up without a fight. Waldo Frank, Gabriela Mistral and Jawaharlal Nehru were among those who campaigned to have Victoria released from prison, the *New York Times* even published a piece on her undeserved situation. Ultimately, the pressure worked and Perón let Victoria go but by then she was a changed woman.

Chapter Ten

Amigos and Vino

*"Can I speak to Horacio?" I know that now
you have a nest of doves in your bladder,
and your crystal motorcycle flies
silently through the air...*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'Supertelephone'

Like an actor before curtain call, I gathered my concentration, cleared my throat, ran my tongue across the inside of my mouth then made my way to the *locutorio*, where I was becoming a regular. The woman behind the register knew my name and with a nod, told me to take any booth. It was a quiet time of the day and surprisingly, I was the only customer.

After settling into the alcove reeking of stale smoke and expensive cologne, I flipped through my notebook splitting down its spine. What arrested me was the list of numbers I had already accumulated, scribbled in margins, on bits of used envelopes and crinkled napkins; this organised chaos formed an impressive contact list.

I dialled Dolores Bengolea's number; a woman answered on the first ring. She was timid and immediately called for Dolores who upon lifting the receiver, spoke in great leaps of passionate conviction. Without much encouragement after my initial introduction, she discussed Villa Ocampo and the umbrella of bureaucracy UNESCO held over it.

'They are extremely difficult to work with.' Her voice rose an octave then gained momentum.

She explained how, in 1973, Victoria donated Villa Ocampo in San Isidro and Villa Victoria in Mar del Plata, along with all of their contents, to UNESCO. Upon her death, she did not want her property to fall into the corrupt hands of Argentina's then military government. And because she had shared a warm relationship with UNESCO while she was alive, she believed her estates would be made into literary and cultural centres for visiting international artists. This was her final wish, which she trusted UNESCO to carry out in exchange for total ownership of her multi-million dollar estates and assets. Soon after her death on the 27th of January 1979, UNESCO sold the contents of Villa Victoria in Mar del Plata in order to pay for the upkeep of Villa Ocampo and in 1983, UNESCO proceeded to sell Villa Victoria for the same purpose. Since Ocampo's death, over one million US dollars in profit has gone missing from the sale of her property as well as possessions, and not a penny has been used to repair Villa Ocampo.

'UNESCO did have plans.' Her voice was fiery, her patience lost. 'One was to pull the house down and sell the land, which we stopped because it went against the agreement of Ocampo's donation. Then they wanted to build a shopping mall and entertainment centre directly behind the house. They considered transforming the house into a hotel, removing all original furniture and books. It was disgraceful. All they had to do was maintain the house but they have not done a thing since she died. These people in charge of Villa Ocampo are common, stingy and only want to make money off the house and Victoria. They want her status but aren't interested in her work.' Dolores was so infuriated about the 'corruption and greed' within UNESCO that she almost dropped the phone. 'You will have to contact UNESCO directly in order to get permission to visit the house and it won't be easy. I have little control over the situation. But I will do what I can

to help. It is almost impossible to reason with UNESCO and just as difficult to find information on Victoria today. Like the rest of Argentina, the literary world is falling apart.'

Ringling UNESCO in Montevideo, Uruguay required a tenacious patience. Madelyn, the gatekeeper, was the first to catch my restrained tone, as I described my project and how visiting Villa Ocampo depended on it.

'There is water everywhere but by no means is it UNESCO's fault.' She defended UNESCO in Spanish and I could not help but wonder why such a responsibility belonged to the Argentine Government. If a house was given to UNESCO, a house worth well over a million dollars not including the furniture, books and history within, then how could the responsibility lie elsewhere?

Eventually I got through to the Jefe, a Mr. Herman van Hooff, who spoke English with a broad German accent. He told me that the house 'was paralysed'.

'The objects are stored,' van Hooff stammered. 'Ring me tomorrow and I'll see what I can do.' He seemed nice enough but when I mentioned that Ana and Dolores wanted to accompany me, van Hooff went silent for a long, slow minute. 'If you are going to cart the entire Ocampo family along with you then that is entirely a different affair. I don't want a reunion. It will complicate matters.' The line went dead. I beat my fist against the counter.

Carlos Andreola, a biographer of Alfonsina, was next on my list of contacts. His reputation as 'a fanatic' of Alfonsina could only be a good thing. From the rattling in the background and the time it took him to answer the phone, I imagined his environment compact with shelves of antique books, sunlight gleaming off polished floors – catching

floating clouds of dust, and a little yellow kitchen with fresh cut jasmine in a jar on the table set for two. His voice sounded like aged brandy and I could see the wrinkles around his eyes. His dedication and enthusiasm towards Alfonsina was lucid as we discussed her life, literature and legacy.

Alfonsina's existence was nothing like Victoria's. She was a single mother at the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote poetry and plays instead of prose, was raised in near poverty and ultimately took her own life, the act for which she is best remembered. Carlos and I mirrored each other in interest; our alliance was immediate as he questioned me about my life. The fact that I lived as far away as Scotland and knew about the great Alfonsina filled him with awe. His belief that she had been forgotten beyond the borders of Argentina was finally shattered.

*The day I die the news will follow
Its practical course
And immediately from office to office
In official record books they'll look for me.*

*Somewhere far away in a little town
Which sleeps in the mountain sun
In an old record book
A hand unknown to me
Will draw a line through my name.³⁰*

When Carlos invited me to a play at the *Sala de Cultura de la Nación*, in honour of Alfonsina's death sixty-four years ago, I could not believe my luck. I gave him my name.

'Solamente dos nombres?' He questioned, explaining that in Argentina, they give at least three names or more with introductions. A tradition that in today's generation no longer exists but I would happily give Carlos my middle name if it made him happy. He

was of a different generation where middle names are still important, ladies wear gloves and men walk on the street side of the pavement.

* * *

I wandered through the streets of San Telmo scented by new leaves and crushed strawberries. Cobbled streets stretched out like lizard scales, Parque Lezama shook with cats, gourd stalls and chess players inside the shade of moulting pines. Old men practised martial arts, young men wrestled, pregnant women tried to walk and vibrant murals told their own histories of this bohemian quarter.

My vision drifted upward towards the old Spanish-style buildings; paint peeling, balconies overloaded with plants, curious people leaning out to watch all happenings below. John had arranged a luncheon at his home in my honour where his wife, Andrew, and a few of their friends would all gather.

John greeted me warmly with two chestnut Doberman pinchers barking loudly behind him. He assured me the dogs were harmless, which I found hard to believe with their teeth seemingly ready to pierce any part of my face. I looked to John, his dogs, then back to John as I followed all three up the spiralling ship-like staircase into his labyrinth of a house. It was the most beautiful, creative, celebrating abode I have ever had the pleasure of entering. Each room was a different emotional colour; turquoise, violet and sage, like a bowl of tropical fruits inside this high ceiling gallery of twinkling sunburst light. Here were tiles of definition, craftsmanship and even more colour reaching up from the floors, bordering the balconies of intertwined bougainvillaea, wisteria, ferns and honeysuckle winding down to the checker board courtyard below. The entire structure

was open, connected only by hallways and doorways leading to one hidden room after another.

Louis Armstrong reached through each room as John introduced me to his wife. She was a young, Argentine yoga teacher with a pastel tattoo of flowers on her shoulder. Her kindness glowed and she was obviously besotted with John who stood over the stove frying poppadoms.

She and I sipped pink daiquiris from martini glasses, shared yoga stories and spoke about Argentine culture as John continued to stir, bake and broil dozens of dishes from his homeland. With the intense heat and strong daiquiris, my cheeks flushed and the rum began to go to my head. Fuelled with conversation and more drink, we sat lazily at a long wooden table in the hallway waiting for the other guests to arrive.

Vlady Kociancich and her husband Alejandro arrived after two, just as the first course was served. They brought a big tub of vanilla ice cream and both held burning cigarettes. Vlady wore white linen. Her gestures were soft as she puffed on the long filter, like Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She told us it was too hot for her to eat. In weather like this, she confessed she could only bring herself to smoke. Her husband Alejandro contrasted with but somehow complemented Vlady. His rugged, masculine journalist appearance of worn jeans and filterless cigarettes made him seem from another world.

We ate rocket salad with sesame seeds, then giant tomatoes layered with mozzarella, fresh basil and olive oil. There was home-made flat bread baked in a Japanese kiln and as the Malbec wine continued to pour, the dogs rested in the shade of what was to be a very long but enjoyable afternoon. The main courses swirled up in hot

spirals from the table; lentil curry, yoghurt and cucumber mixed together, a fresh salsa with cilantro, chicken and some part of a pig cooked again in the Japanese kiln, standing in the corner of the hallway on a giant stand like an Egyptian Statue.

It was at this moment that Andrew appeared with a jovial smile and two bottles of Malbec wine; they began making their way around the table, over and over again. Vlady explained such abominable heat does not exist in their northern Argentine town. So, as we ate her plate remained empty but she took long drags of her cigarette and spoke about Borges. Apparently Vlady and Borges were very good friends. Borges was also a good friend of Victoria, who he met through his family in 1925. They were of the same social status and Victoria was enthusiastic about Borges's work, publishing and promoting him in various editions of *Sur*. I thought about their conversations, how similar they might have been to what was immediately taking place around me.

This feast to end all feasts peaked with Alejandro's ice cream and an orange and lemon sauce. We continued our conversation about politics, this time about Bush's right wing regime out to colonise, not only the Middle East but the rest of the developing world. *In my capacity as a woman, what may come of that reciprocal love strikes me as more important than everything else; more important than what may come of all the hatreds. Hatreds don't interest me. In my capacity as a woman, I cannot subscribe to the idea of the game of destruction of young bodies...Men and women – I repeat, and women – have never achieved anything great without heroism. That I know. But heroism is applicable to so many things that don't have to do with war...*³¹

I was relieved to know I was not alone in my rational political views, reassuring my new friends that Bush's war on terror was both wrong and immoral.

Alejandro and Vlady eventually left us with lots of kisses but before she stepped out through those massive white doors, Vlady gave me the number of the translator, Eduardo Paz Leston, who had written on Victoria Ocampo. She told me he knew all sort of things about Victoria, that he would be a very good porteño to speak with.

And as the rest of us walked through the bordering streets of San Telmo, through the antique lanes, shops and sidewalk restaurants, I could hardly believe how fortunate I was to have met such kind, hospitable people. Andrew stopped us in front of a wall, in between two alleyways of second-hand jewellery stalls. The bricks were covered in poetic graffiti that read; *when they piss on us, the press says it's raining.*

‘But there’s a better one that goes; *when they shit on us, the press says it's hailing.*’ Andrew recited with a sparkling grin.

Chapter Eleven

Monica Ottino

I owe them something that has mattered in my life...my not having been content just to exist.

– Victoria Ocampo, speaking of Gabriela Mistral and Virginia Woolf

Monica Ottino invited me to her office and my journey into town got me thinking about bohemians and more importantly, bohemians in Argentina. I wondered why most of the women writers I have met so far are married to doctors, living very comfortable lives.

What happened to the struggling artist?

As I approached the Anglo Argentine Cultural Centre, the security guard remembered me from before, rushing me in past the immigrating hopefuls then quickly re-chained the glass doors. He walked me to the old fashioned lift, slid the doors closed, pressed the button and told me Monica was expecting me.

She greeted me with open arms. Within minutes we were talking about Victoria. We gossiped about her lover Julian, whose family Monica had met because for years they lived in the same apartment building. *J would say to me: 'Ever since we started seeing each other I've never looked at another woman.'* But even if I could have enclosed him in an airtight crystal box, my jealousy wouldn't have been diminished. I was jealous of how other woman had pleased him, or of the way these woman had found pleasure in him.³²

Monica described Victoria's commanding nature as very cruel at times because she could not stop herself. She did not like to lose at the card game *poso* and when she did, she would throw the cards up in the air then explode into an abusive tirade. Then two minutes later, she would politely offer everyone tea as if nothing had happened.

Victoria's friends could not be fragile or too sensitive because if they were, they would not last long in her temperamental company. Aside from her emotional extremes, Monica recognised that Victoria had plenty of friends, many of whom were famous writers, homosexuals or Jews fleeing persecution in mainland Europe.

Her charity was 'easy to ignite,' Monica emphasised, as she watched me take notes. 'She was very generous to Waldo Frank.' And it was Frank who not only encouraged her to form *Sur* but also suggested the name. *There are doubtless other daughters of the Conquistadors in whom the spirit of a New World does not live. And there may well be a son of immigrants in which that spirit does live. It is the deed, not the talking about it, and the shouting America, that shows the real stuff. You bien chère, were American, sans le savoir! Your house, your spirit, your sorrow, your struggle, your malaise with your friends (my friends, too) in Paris – all were signs of your Americanism – but you did not know it. Sur is deeply American, through the very look of its pages, and every accent of your Carta, and all I have read in your book is American too.*³³

As for UNESCO and Victoria's property, Monica admitted that they were 'Greek Gifts' – so great and grand, UNESCO did not know what to do with them. Towards the end of her life, Victoria had severe financial problems (which I was unaware of) because she wanted to pay her contributors what they were worth. The only things of monetary value Victoria left were her homes and their contents. Monica implied that Victoria died just before she went broke.

'She had a lot of debt and an insecure financial status in the end.' A very difficult situation to conceive. Victoria had always lived a life full of wealth, luxury and comfort.

‘I can’t imagine Victoria paying a bill; others must have paid the bills for her,’ Monica suggested as she poured the contents of a saccharine sachet into her black coffee. I reached for the sugar. Monica adjusted her posture.

‘It’s good you use sugar and not this.’ She flicked the pink packet in the bin. I told her the coffee in Argentina was too strong for me to drink without real sugar. She moved onto the fact that like Mistral, Victoria lived a life full of contradictions.

‘She was a great Catholic but then there were the affairs, divorce and her successful use of birth control. People used to say that Victoria was always in heat but she was just a woman with many lovers.’ Monica’s tone was noncommittal and I could not figure out if she approved or disapproved of Victoria’s behaviour. *Argentine men, those primitive men, those authoritarian, jealous ‘owners’ of women who generally divided women into categories: respectable women – mothers, wives, sisters, etc. – and women who have no right to be respected, made for fly-by-night copulation, adulterous women, crazy virgins or absolute prostitutes. This second category, adulteresses, is where I belonged.*³⁴

Stimulated by my conversations with Ana, Rosita and Monica, my understanding of Victoria the woman was taking form in a different way, a more intimate way. Monica explained how Julian and Victoria rendezvoused in a place they had together in Cordoba, from 1912 to 1929. And during that time, Victoria also built a very modern-looking home for them in Palermo near Plaza Republica de Chile in Buenos Aires.

‘It was completely different from any other architecture of the time. The architect was ashamed to build it but Victoria didn’t care,’ Monica said with an indifferent flip of her hand. Apparently, Victoria could do whatever she wanted, when she wanted.

As for her true love Julian, he had the reputation of being very truthful and supportive of Victoria. He encouraged her in her career and loved her unconditionally. He was the man Victoria called her true husband and their relationship lasted longer than not only her marriage but most marriages. Ultimately, however, Victoria found monogamy difficult. Eventually her spoiled upbringing, her need to have whatever she wanted when she wanted tempted her loyalty to Julian and she had an affair with a French WWII pilot 'Z'. She was honest with Julian, telling him of her deceit but her confession could not repair what was broken. Victoria's mistake destroyed her chance of true happiness. *Now as I look back...it seems to me that in order to understand the laws of the human condition – and other laws with no name, which however do exist – I had to receive the baptism of this fire, of this kind of love. I received it neither too soon nor too late, at a time when I was able to live fully all that this love revealed to me.*³⁵

Our stories and historical gossip expanded into a broad-brushed portrait of Victoria's nature. Monica tucked a blonde strand of hair behind her ear, sipped her coffee with a sense of nostalgia and went on to mention how Victoria had bought flats in Buenos Aires for her Jewish friends fleeing persecution in Europe. But was her generosity power-driven? Because Victoria needed to have the reins in her hands at all times, was there some sort of ulterior motive behind her perpetual giving? Did her wealth cause guilt or simply inspire her to share her good fortune with others? Where does the line fall between the need for power and the desire to give? *After we moved I became aware for the first time of the problem of wealth and poverty. The change made me take a close look at things that I had never noticed before. I suppose that I had accepted the comfort and luxury that surrounded me, the way a bird accepts his nest – without knowing how it was*

made or whether other birds had similar kinds of nests. But the experience of living in unfamiliar rooms forced me to realise that those rooms were luxurious. One night while Micaela was braiding my hair, in my new bedroom, I said to her: 'If it were up to me there wouldn't be any rich people or any poor people, do you know that?'³⁶

Monica slowly pulled the blind, then pushed a great stack of books from her side of the desk to mine. Some were bound photocopies, others the real thing, which I promised to return promptly. Inside the stack was a copy of *Eva y Victoria*. I stared at the purple cover of the two women, faces overlapping, white-framed sunglasses, bleached hair, sultry, pensive looks and a kind of soul piercing enchantment.

'*Eva y Victoria* provoked a kind of fear.' Initially, she called the play *Evita y Victoria* but somehow, *Eva* sounded better to her, more natural, with a fluidity lacking in the first title. I skimmed through the text and instantly sensed a kind of exemplary research into both women's lives as well as psyches. Monica included the most intimate of details; cotton wool on the ends of daffodils, Victoria's authoritative tone, Eva Perón's strong will against those who considered her inferior. The play captures two of Argentina's most celebrated women in an imaginary encounter where the desire for equality for all women overrides class, politics and pride. In the end, these two very different women find a common ground, a ground which never existed during their lifetimes. Victoria questions Eva, 'I'm asking myself if we're being sincere in our feminism. We're not doing too badly in a male-controlled world, we know the codes, the passwords. They've handed you a good dose of power; they've allowed me to imagine I'm a great intellectual.'

Speaking with Monica about Victoria was like speaking with an old friend about another old friend. We discussed *Sur*, its end, and how all of Victoria's remaining *Sur* friends are few.

'*Sur* fell apart when Victoria died,' Monica explained. 'It continues to exist but as a ghost. Rare collections were practically given away to any willing bidder. Victoria trusted the wrong people with her intellectual belongings, people who ultimately squandered and sold off what she treasured most. It is like an empire in the last stages of demise.'

Monica helped me pack her books in my bag. 'A few I have photocopied, the others, I'm afraid, you'll have to do yourself.' There were so many pages, so many dusty jackets and worn titles. Lifting the backpack onto my shoulders took the two of us planning, then counting to four.

'Thank you.' I felt like her student.

'Enjoy,' she mouthed as she waved from her doorway.

Chapter Twelve

Lady of Poetry

*On the back
wall
a square
opened up
that looked out
over the void.*

*And the moon rolled
up to the window;
it stopped
and said to me:
'I'm not moving from here;
I'm looking at you'...*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'And the Head Began to Burn'

Until this point, Victoria had, for the most part, consumed all focus; now I wanted to find out more about Alfonsina Storni. Delfina Muschietti was another one of Lea's suggestions, whom I rang and arranged to interview. She suggested we meet in a café on the corner of Maipu and Juarte, 'Cerca del Norte Supermercado.' El Norte Supermercado's amber glow lingered not far from the Gardenhouse and I thought this café without a name had to be within walking distance. As chance would have it this café was miles away from everything familiar because there is more than one El Norte Supermercado in Vicente López, which I would soon discover, is a vast suburb that stretches far beyond what the naked eye can see.

Because I was unaware of this, I proceeded with the humbling task of sticking my head through the swinging doors of each and every café within my local El Norte's vicinity. I asked the proprietors if they knew of this Juarte Street or mysterious café. All shook their heads sympathetically. Eventually, I flagged down a fantastic bus, rusty and

decorated to circus standards. I asked the driver if he went to Juarte and he waved me on. The bus skidded forward with a smell of burnt rubber and he told me it was quite a distance. I slotted my fare into the eroding ticket machine behind him, focusing on the road ahead.

Driving away from town was interesting and if I was not racing against the clock, I would have enjoyed the ride; but I was already late and the consistent random stopping of the bus was beginning to drive me mad. When we got to Maipu and Juarte, the driver flipped the door open then nodded. There was indeed a café and inside, beside the window, a clean cut woman sat writing notes in a diary.

‘Fiona.’ She smiled, leaned over to kiss my cheeks then apologised half-heartedly for leading me astray. I apologised for getting lost, annoyed by my own mistake.

The posture Delfina assumed made her look academic: straight back, square shoulders, a curling, questioning forehead. She fiddled with the top ivory button of her shirt, adjusted the pleats of her skirt then organised the books on the table into a perfect symmetrical row. She wore navy, an outfit complemented by the blueberry-sized beads hanging around the base of her neck. Nothing necessarily set her apart from the crowd but nothing drew her to it either. She seemed to sit in limbo between two worlds, as if she belonged to the casual café crowd but at the same time felt more comfortable beyond it, in a library or better yet, the confines of her own home. Like Monica and the woman from Santa Catalina Monastery, Delfina’s hair was bobbed, shoulder length and sprayed to ensure no hair stuck out of place.

We ordered two coffees from a waiter with loose dentures that floated in his mouth like lozenges. Delfina placed her thick biography on the table then went on to tell

me how Alfonsina's belongings have not been preserved because the government has other, more 'important' matters to attend to. I shook my head, encouraging her to go on, as my right hand began to cramp. I was frantically trying to keep up with Delfina who spoke like a possessed whip, dishing out pre-rehearsed passages. Her porteño Spanish raced and veered as if trapped in a wind tunnel desperate to get out.

Born in Switzerland to Italian/Swiss parents, Alfonsina did not move to Argentina until she was four. Her father, Alfonso Storni, was a drunk and ran a beer factory with his brothers in San Juan until it failed, forcing the family to move to Rosario where their new-found poverty was less obvious. They tried opening a café beside the railway station but that quickly failed. The Storni family was in dire straits and because Alfonso was of little help, all responsibility rested on the shoulders of his wife, Paula Martignoni de Storni. Alfonsina often said that she *grew up like a little animal without supervision*. She received no discipline and *lied shamelessly*; however, by the age of twelve she was earning rent as a seamstress and factory worker.

*You can understand that a person like me, who came in contact with life in such a direct way, in such a masculine way, let us say, could not live, suffer, or behave like a child protected by the four walls of her house. And my writing has inevitably reflected this, which is my personal truth: I have had to live as a man, so I demand to live by male standards. What experience has given me is greater than anything anyone ever told me. What I am doing is anticipating the woman of the future, because female standards all depend on the economic system.*³⁷

Alfonsina's harsh upbringing positively shaped her future as both woman and writer. She fought to have her career and independent life; but although Delfina was her biographer, she showed little enthusiasm about any of this.

'There are so many aspiring poets in Argentina.' Her Spanish raced. She sipped her coffee, carefully wiping the corners of her mouth. Dog walkers passed by the window and a pregnant woman came into the café for a glass of water. She stood at the bar, looking over the customers, then swallowed the entire glass in one thirsty gulp.

I spurred our discussion forward with my own knowledge about Alfonsina but Delfina seemed preoccupied. Obviously she had somewhere else to be; hasty words dusted over the surface of Alfonsina's bravery, motherhood and poetry.

All my questions received lukewarm responses, a shrug of the shoulders, a fleeting glance at her watch. I knew we were cheating Alfonsina, just by the speed and distance of our conversation. There was little passion in Delfina's voice when she mentioned how Alfonsina had, at the green age of fifteen, toured with a theatre company for a year. She received rave reviews. Alfonsina had always wanted to be an actress but did not have a suitable temperament; the emotional stress was too much for the young Alfonsina. Later in life she would remember, *I was really only a child, but I looked like a woman, so life became unbearable for me. The atmosphere was choking.*³⁸

After her stint in the theatre, Alfonsina returned to school, this time in Coronda, to become a teacher. She excelled in her studies, secretly working as a chorus girl at the weekends to pay her tuition. Her first assignment was in Rosario, which is where she fell in love with the married Conrado Nalé Roxlo; and at nineteen she was pregnant with his child. Delfina was keen to avoid the topic.

‘Necesito el baño,’ was Delfina’s response and she disappeared for a good few minutes. Was she disgusted that Alfonsina had chosen to have a child out of wedlock? Alfonsina’s determination to raise her child alone was admirable, especially in 1912 when single mothers were considered a social disgrace. But in the twenty-first century, surely these ideas are outdated? As far as I could see, Alfonsina wanted what was the best for her son, Alejandro, and believed he would be the object of less gossip, scorn and rejection, in a big city like Buenos Aires. She harmed no one. If anything, life there was most difficult for Alfonsina. To support the two of them, she worked as a sales clerk in a pharmacy, a cashier in a store and market research analyst. From one hardship to another, Alfonsina pressed on and she prevailed. Writing about life kept her alive.

*I throw myself here at your feet, sinful,
my dark face against your blue earth,
you the virgin among armies of palm trees
that never grow old as humans do.*

*I don’t dare look at your pure eyes
or dare touch your miraculous hand:
I look behind me and a river of rashness
urges me guiltlessly on against you...*

*for I couldn’t have possibly lived
cut off from your shadow, since you blinded me
at birth with your fierce branding iron.³⁹*

Delfina touched upon Alfonsina’s suicide in Mar del Plata and after half an hour, Delfina drew my attention to a Library dedicated to Alfonsina, at 1538 Venezuela. Then she apologised, rose and told me she had to leave. Confused and a little worried by her sudden departure, I thanked her for her time and offered to pay for the coffees. This was the only moment, throughout our entire conversation when she smiled.

‘Gracias.’

I felt cheated, abandoned by this woman I hardly knew. Unlike the other porteños I had met so far, Delfina seemed uninterested in not only me but also Alfonsina. Had she grown weary of the subject matter that had brought her work into the spotlight? Or perhaps I was being too sensitive. Maybe she really did have somewhere else to be.

* * *

I wanted to find the Hotel Castelar on Avenida del Mayo. Alfonsina used to meet with a literary group there, which included such writers as Gómez de la Serna, Roberto Arlt and García Lorca. In 1934, García Lorca and Pablo Neruda spent five months writing *Paloma por dentro (Dove on the Inside)*, at the Castelar; however, only one copy of the book was ever made. During this same year, Alfonsina wrote a poem dedicated to Lorca:

*Looking for the roots of wings
his forehead
moves to the right
and to the left.*

*Over the whirlwind of his face
a curtain of death is drawn,
thick and twisted.*

*A wild animal
snarls in his face
trying to destroy him
in its rage...⁴⁰*

The hotel was gorgeous: marble walls, chandelier lighting but outside the flags were torn and faded. A man from behind the counter told me he knew nothing of Alfonsina but that García Lorca indeed was a regular at the hotel. He pointed to the bronze plaque on the wall. Aside from the reception staff and a couple of bored looking

bellboys dressed in maroon uniforms and black bow ties, the hotel was empty. They urged me to book a room and take a Turkish bath.

‘It is cheap with your rate of exchange,’ they insisted in English, loading me down with various brochures.

* * *

To truly appreciate Buenos Aires, you must wander the streets aimlessly, without initial direction or a working watch. Only then will you see through the city’s eyes. From a map on the front of Steiner’s biography, I was led to believe Victoria’s grandmother had lived on the cross streets of Esmeralda and Juncal, so I drifted through the well-sliced avenues, parallel but tangled, until I found a patch of quiet pavement.

I stood in the shade of four milky buildings, beside a tiny lingerie shop and across the street from an open-door bakery sending savoury scents my way. I looked up to the historic buildings bordered by Spanish iron balconies, flowering pillars and circular windows wrapping round corners like antique bracelets. I was unsure of which one belonged to Victoria’s grandmother, but did it matter? As I stood with my eyes closed and my face pointing south, I realised how tremendously different this city used to be, how protected most porteños were from all of the unmanageable problems they face today. It is strange that with all of our technology and giant leaps forward, we have somehow been going backwards too. The contrasting old versus new architecture above told me this, as did the music blasting from a passing car and the homeless family camped beneath a nearby tree picking rubbish from bins.

The wind suddenly turned fresh and moved the pages of my open book back and forth. My daydreaming about Victoria and her past continued up Juncal Street. Grey

high-rises, warm concrete and diesel fumes narrowed my mood, sharpening it into focus.

I wanted to find Victoria's footprints, heels and toes, so I turned left on Liberación.

No one seemed to notice me as a foreigner anymore. There were no persistent patrons or random followers. I was blending in with my environment.

A hazy point of direction for the day was the Colón Theatre. I wanted to step inside the infamous place where Victoria fell in love with Julián Martínez. I wanted to experience the enchanting surroundings of their everlasting love affair and see this historic opera house through my own eyes.

Named after Christopher Columbus (or Colón in Spanish), the theatre was founded in 1908 through a series of European architects, designers and outlandish pipe dreams. Teatro Colón takes up an entire Buenos Aires block (which are enormous) and upon entering it feels like some sort of European collision of both material and design. The overall effect is overwhelming. Various kinds of Italian marble cover the floors, banisters and ceilings. There are rooms full of mirrors and French furniture. Scarlet carpets line all walkways, only today they are frayed and tattered. Glass cases somewhat feebly protect the theatre's artefacts; browning photographs, dusty costumes and instruments.

Inside the concert hall, nearly 2,500 red velvet seats arch like a half moon. Gold sparkles from each edge, corner and fold. The ceiling is covered in an elaborate mural rosette outlined by the names of the world's most famous composers. From it hangs a massive chandelier that can be lowered for particular sound effects. Various sections of the orchestra often sit inside the chandelier's cavity, producing a thunderous sound. Once the Colón was an extravagant meeting ground for the rich to dress up, gossip and find

suitable spouses but today it is mostly tourists who buy the tickets because only they and the wealthy porteños can afford to go.

There is a small wooden model of the theatre beside the ticket desk, with holes representing seats and strips of rolled up coloured paper tucked deep inside; the various colours depict the various grades of seats. To purchase a ticket, the woman behind the desk tells you to choose a seat then she removes the slip of paper, which is actually a ticket.

My lower end ticket cost one hundred pesos. I tucked the thin paper in my pocket then went back to the Gardenhouse to change into something more appropriate. On the way there, I passed a terrifying pet shop with kittens in tiny corroded cages and sad-looking parrots with pus oozing from their eyes. I wanted desperately to free them but where could they go? Into the streets of Buenos Aires? They would survive longer behind bars than in the urban wild but what a miserable existence either way. Their possibilities and the fact that I could do nothing depressed me.

The scheduled performance for the evening was *Don Carlo*, an opera I had never seen before. My seat was on the main floor, somewhere between the plush stalls and the shadows of the rear. I looked up to the stalls peppered in women with diamonds and furs. Even if it was summer, this was the place to get away with that kind of decadence. I wondered which stall Victoria had when she watched the performance of *Parsifal* and where Julián was sitting when she caught her first magnetic glimpse of him. Unlike those above me, the section I was in held less glamour. To the left of me, a couple of loud tourists wore jeans and chewed gum and to the right, a large man sweated uncontrollably. I thought back to how, in Victoria's day, appearance was everything, especially at a place

like the Colón. *The instant I saw J., at a distance, his presence overwhelmed me. He gave me a joking, tender look. (Later I discovered that his eyes often had that expression.) I looked at that look and that look looked at my mouth, as if my mouth were my eyes. My mouth, a prisoner of that look, began to tremble. I wasn't able to parry his look the way he might have parried mine. It lasted an entire century; a second.*⁴¹

When the lights went down and the orchestra picked up, I felt inspired but at the same time, very much alone. I wanted to share this experience with R. but there were only strangers beside me blowing bubbles and dabbing foreheads. When the violins and cellos found their way in, I tasted my own tear. The singers performed with such conviction and truth, nothing else seemed to matter.

At intermission, I headed to the bar but the only beverage available was sweet black coffee from a massive thermos. The coffee came in a plastic cup that burned my hands. While sipping, I noticed a jar of biscuits. I took one and dipped it into my cup. A woman from the stalls (in a fur coat) also bought a coffee but what stunned me was how many biscuits she consumed in the space of five minutes. She stuck her hand in the jar until her other hand was full then proceeded to eat the lot, regardless of the crumbs that stuck to the front of her coat.

In the second act, the percussion and trumpet sections carried me away to Don Carlo's world. The tourists beside me had left during the intermission and I felt so connected to the performers that when they stopped, my breathing seemed to as well. It was an emotional experience, especially when a group of school children appeared on the stage, in their blue and white uniforms, to help sing the finale. But when the tenors and sopranos joined the children in a bow, several members from the audience got up to

leave. I felt so embarrassed that I applauded louder to show my appreciation only to be asked by the man on my right to move my legs in order for him to pass. Was this typical behaviour for the opera? If I had had a bouquet of roses, I would have thrown them onto the stage.

Chapter Thirteen

Mar del Plata

*Teeth of flowers, coif of dew,
hands of grass, you, fine nurse,
prepare for me the sheets of earth
and the quilt of brushed moss...*

– *Alfonsina Storni, from 'I'm Going to Sleep'*

I threw my most important things in a backpack, squared up my room and left the Gardenhouse at 6:30a.m. to catch the bus to Mar del Plata, the beach resort where Alfonsina committed suicide and Victoria spent her summers.

The streets of a sleepy Buenos Aires were half-lit and silent, aside from a few gasping cars. I watched the city sparkle in the orange glow of a still dawn. Cool air and fan-shaped clouds passed behind buildings and above green awnings. Feral cats groomed themselves in the parks, huddled round bowls of fresh food and water. Rows of homeless people turned the bookstalls of Plaza Italia into a campground. Businesspeople began to make their way to work, stepping over the homeless, clutching their locked briefcases in both hands.

From Retiro I walked through Plaza Libertador to get to the Lloyds Bank at the far end, then crossed paths with a drunk guy in a two-day suit and his lady friend from the previous night. The guy could hardly stand. He leaned on top of the cash machine with a desperate kind of anger. The heavily made up lady, in a short skirt and long boots, was trying to take money out of the machine on his behalf, repeatedly pressing numbers that he provided to her in sentimental song. Eventually she gave up to allow him to continue punching blindly. She wanted her money and was not going to leave without it,

no matter how drunk her friend was but after half an hour of this frustrating error upon error, I found my voice. Not only did I have a bus to catch but this was the only working bank for miles and I could not arrive in a new city without any cash.

‘Perdón señor y señora. Cuando terminan, necesito usar la máquina.’

They were genuinely apologetic, as the lady kept one hand on him and the other on his wallet, leaving me to do my own number punching.

With a hundred pesos in my front pocket, apples in my bag, a bottle of local water and a new notebook in hand, I boarded the bus for Mar del Plata. The double-decker bus was full of porteño holidaymakers in dark sunglasses and wide brimmed hats.

As the bus pulled out of the station, I noticed a shrouded barrio of Buenos Aires, tucked away from the parks and public. Not far from the Recoleta but far enough, this shantytown sprawled out for as far as the eye could see. Skeleton dogs ran in packs, shoes ceased to exist and tarnished tin roofs winked in harmony when the light hit them right. Children with swollen bellies played in broken glass and sewage, shacks wrestled each other like weeds; a few boasted little vegetable gardens where laundry dangled overhead. And all lined the snaking polluted river where residents bathe, drink and shit.

The bus drove on, past the sprawling city limits and into empty, vast country. A few lone houses watched over the straight road weaving with the heat.

* * *

Five hours and two crustless cheese sandwiches later, we pulled into Mar del Plata’s bus station, encircled by middle class homes with red slated roofs and neatly pruned plum trees. Inside the station, cafés, bakeries, confectionery shops and locutorios filled the relatively empty but smoky space. Fluorescent lights silhouetted a couple of men leaning

against a magazine stand. Light trapped the smoke dispersing rapidly above them as they kissed each other good-bye. Inside one of the cafés, a group of old women drank coffee and gossiped, elegantly dressed in matching hats and gloves. Their exaggerated sighs echoed through the station, bouncing off worn ceilings and plastic chairs. Inside a dozen laughing children chased each other, armed with sticks and a battered football. All doors stood ajar, all windows remained opened and a dog howled in the distance.

I left the station anxious for the shore. Something led me instinctively towards the sea, past the badly beaten high rises. I could almost smell the salt water, feel the white sand beneath my feet and see Mar del Plata, the 'Pearl of the Atlantic' glistening beneath her favourite sun. Intuition led me southeast. The aggressive wind pushed me back but I was determined to stand on the edge of the world and see like Victoria and Alfonsina.

As I continued toward those salt smells and sea sounds, I noticed how the city was glued to the past. Buildings, shops, clothing, signs and people made me wonder if that two-storey bus had been some sort of time machine. Not only was the architecture of Mar del Plata from the seventies, but all of the people were somehow stuck there too. What had happened to this promising coastal city that boasted the best of summertime frolicking?

Caution and a pondering uneasiness forced me forward, and when I eventually found the shore, a confused disappointment filled me. The water was brown, rough, polluted with all sorts of toxins. The sand was full of stones and coloured glass. I felt isolated by my surroundings.

I followed the coastal path, wrapping around several jagged peninsulas. A few leathery old bodies braved the wind, taking shelter beneath the expansive seawall with

their maté gourds and tanning lotion. My thoughts stretched to the horizon, to home and to R. I felt so alone in this abandoned town with no one to meet or interview.

The sky began to cloud over and I realised I had to find a bed for the night. Back in Buenos Aires, Ana recommended the Hostal de Alem, a small but quaint place in the residential neighbourhood. I walked away from the centre of town towards the Port, along the rocky coast with a bag on my back and map in my pocket. Passing runners and a naked knife-sharpener (which, among other things seemed a little dangerous), the environment went from strange to bizarre. After a good few miles of winding slopes and lookout points, I stood before a deserted petrol station and restaurant on a steep hill. Above them was the Alem, watching over the ocean like an albatross. I would be their only guest for the weekend and what appeared to be the only foreigner in all of Mar del Plata; an undeniable rush of loneliness consumed me.

After depositing my things I ventured back into town because the silence at the Alem was deafening. And after another cheese sandwich from an empty sidewalk café on *Rivadavia* (the main pedestrian street) the waiter enlightened me on the differences between Chileans and Argentineans. Because he was Chilean, he emphasised how much ‘more dignified and well mannered the Chileans are.’ He chased street children away from the tables, then leaned over to hush, ‘you see, this would never happen in Chile.’ When I asked him why he was living in Argentina, his black eyes flashed. ‘My wife is Argentinean.’

Feeling sorry for myself, I bought a chocolate ice cream and sat in the corner of the shop reading Alfonsina’s poetry, wondering if sadness somehow knit Mar del Plata’s air together.

*There is in me the awareness that I belong
To chaos; I am only material substance.
And my self; and my being, is something as eternal
As the vertiginous universal change.*

*I am like something of the Cosmos. In my soul there expands
A force which, perhaps, is electrical;
And it lives in other worlds so full of the infinite
That on earth I feel filled with solitude. [...]*

*My body, which is my soul, often seems like an instrument
Of silver with strings of glass;
The strings are in tune with nature and
It is for that reason that I feel
Incarnate with all that is past.⁴²*

As I turned pages and swallowed rich frozen cream, two street kids came into the shop begging customers and when they received less than expected, they turned on the man dressed in stripes behind the counter. With one swift movement, each boy tore open a handful of sugar sachets and threw them at the man. Sugar fell through the shop like snow. The man rolled his eyes and tried chasing them away but instead, he only helped the kids knock over tables, chairs, cups and napkin holders. Eventually he realised it was easier to give each child an ice cream. A silent truce was made and the children strutted out of the shop victoriously, with vanilla cones big as torches in their stained little hands.

The rain resumed but before I went back to my room for the night, I decided to visit Victoria's Villa. Without an umbrella, sweater or proper walking shoes, I set off on an extensive hike that took me through Mar del Plata's suburbia. I knew the house had been restored as a museum, I also knew it would be closed at this late hour of the day, but I was desperate to see it even from the street.

The wide, clean streets were unusually still. The rain pounded down in fresh, plump drops. I walked for what felt like miles, past mansions and beneath maple trees

siphoning more water over my head until I found Villa Victoria, luminously glowing through the climbing ivy. Several blooming lavender bushes encircled the weary pale yellow structure, gently tainting the cool wet air. I looked up to the wooden walls and windowpanes, the slated roof and peeling shutters. An enormous billboard of Victoria's face stared down at me.

I approached the gate with nervous anticipation. A tabby cat ran towards me. I picked her up, stroked her and together we took shelter from the gusts of misty rain. Lightning ripped open the sky, thunder roared and suddenly, a man with a silver beard walked out from the rear of the house. With him he brought the granary smells of a kitchen, dipped in molasses and honey. He told me I was holding 'Victoria.' Shocked by her reincarnation, I accidentally dropped her onto the boards below. The fall did not seem to bother her. She obviously had several more lives and carried on purring but I could feel my face contorting, my knees trembling a bit.

'Le gusta.' The stranger said as he lifted his chin in recognition. In his presence, I felt at ease but wondered who he was. Smiling, he offered to take my photograph with 'Victoria' then suggested it would be best if I returned in the morning, when the museum was open to the public.

There was a light on in the far room; it flickered then went out. Pots rattled in the kitchen, a window shut upstairs, lavender bushes stirred and a car motor turned over in the distance.

I walked back to the Alem with a raw sense of independence warm inside my chest. I was existing, successfully, by myself in a foreign country. I felt so strong as both a person and a woman. Victoria would be proud of me. *From the moment we begin to*

*write, we are condemned to not being able to talk about anything but ourselves, about what we have seen with our eyes, felt with our sensitivity, understood with our intelligence.*⁴³ And Alfonsina might tell me, *The day will come when women will dare to reveal how they really feel. That day our values will be turned upside down, and fashions will surely change.*⁴⁴

Life was difficult for Alfonsina. She did not have a privileged background like Victoria, she did not have a summerhouse or wealthy aunts to leave her with a massive inheritance but Alfonsina survived, regardless of her humble beginnings. Why, as Gabriela Mistral asked, had (Victoria) ignored Alfonsina Storni? Why did she not befriend her as she had done so many other writers? Perhaps because Alfonsina never won the Nobel Prize, she did not come from money and she was not associated with the upper class. Alfonsina struggled throughout her life whereas Victoria never worried. Of course I admire Victoria for her passion, conviction and work. I respect her fierceness and self-belief. *There's some good in every evil. Perhaps not having been able to be an actress was a blessing in disguise. At least I'd like to think so. The theatre would have absorbed me and prevented me from doing other things. Temporarily, it would have kept me far from my country, as I couldn't imagine my acting in any language but French. Now that all that is long past, I will say that the only thorn still pricking me is the certain knowledge that I could have made a career on the stage, maybe even a brilliant one, with an authentic vocation.*⁴⁵

Like Alfonsina, Victoria was drawn to the theatre but in her situation it was not an uneasy temperament that drew her away from the stage, it was her conservative family and upper class status. Women of Victoria's position did not act, acting was for the lower

classes. Her parents were adamant, either them and her inheritance, or acting. Victoria gave in. Writing, on the other hand, was also a taboo career choice, but it was considered a lesser evil than acting. Victoria's mind was made up: she would be a writer.

Chapter Fourteen

Villa Victoria

*The sea was alone
and the sky alone
and everything was grey
and cold space
and I heard nothing,
saw nothing
more than that monotonous
and lifeless grey.*

– *Alfonsina Storni, from 'Dog and Sea'*

I woke to the sounds of metal shutters rising, rain beating against my window and the ocean falling into the shore. The front wall of my room was soaked from the storm. A pair of men's shoes stuck out from the corner of my bed. I kicked them out, looked under the mattress and exhaled with relief. Someone must have forgotten them but why had I not seen them the night before? After a tepid shower, I dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. Apparently the cleaning lady was also the cook. She told me to sit at the table on the patio and within seconds, a typical Argentine breakfast faced me: three glazed miniature croissants, very strong sweet black coffee and brown juice. Sugar stuck to my fingers, lips and teeth. The icy wind whipped through my wet hair. The end of my nose had turned purple. Already, Mar del Plata was growing on me, its stillness, simplicity and climate were settling into my skin.

Hours would have to pass before Villa Victoria opened, so I decided to walk along the seashore and find Alfonsina's monument. Fiddling with the cap of my pen and camera reel, I wondered how Mar del Plata felt during her lifetime. What did it look like without the high rises? What did a clean beach invite? What was it like full of people?

*At the edge of the water
the yellow poles
offer death ties.*

*The sun sleeps without anger
on the hand
which patiently waits.*

*Finally,
a tiny fish
tinges with blue
the tip of the hook.*

*And a piece of the sky,
smaller than a rose petal,
flops on the ground,
wounded to death.*

*Useless drama:
the fisherman once again dips
his rod,
and the sun, without anger,
once again sleeps on his hand.⁴⁶*

I watched fishermen throw their lines out to the shifting water, fingers of light drifting across leathery hands. Waves slapped down against boulders; penny-sized crabs scattered then hid. Everything smelt of sea, salt and sand. A long row of street vendors began setting up their stalls. They unpacked glittery Mar del Plata clocks, pipes, cups, ashtrays covered in a variety of shells. The wind blew sand in my eyes as I passed Playa Popular then Punta Iglesia.

Alfonsina's statue looked over Playa La Perla, another patch of beach not unlike the rest. A woman made of marble stared out longingly into the distance, her hands disproportionately long and extended. At the base there was a side profile of her round face as well as plaques dedicated to her by family, admirers, poets and comrades. Freshly picked sunflowers lay in bunches directly beneath her feet.

The statue looked nothing like Alfonsina. The face belonged to either a model or imagined image, the body was idealised into one of perfection. Vandals had also taken it upon themselves to elaborate with spray painted marijuana leaves, stripes through the arms and the word *RACING* running down the length of her body. The defaced statue had seen brighter days, as had the sign signalling it. Letters had been rubbed out, mud balls thrown from passing cars. But there was some hope; both remained enveloped by wild pink sea flowers and a sapphire sky.

Uneven stone steps led me up to the statue. There was a girl sitting beside it, fiddling with the rip in her jeans just below the knee. She tugged at loose threads, while puffing gently on a cigarette. She said hello then told me how polluted the sea had become.

‘Garbage fills this beach. The people here have no work, nothing to do. Drugs are everywhere – it’s a sad place.’ Her voice was raspy. She looked to the horizon with swollen eyes. ‘I always wanted to be an artist and when I lose hope, I visit Alfonsina. She inspires me.’ The girl looked to her painting of the shore then up to the statue. ‘Someday, I will leave this place and if I have to, I will leave like Alfonsina. I will walk into the sea and make it my bed.’

*I should like to walk along the distant seashore
This divine October morning;*

*And to let the golden sand and green waters
And clear skies witness my passing...*

*I should like to be tall, proud, perfect,
Like a Roman woman, to harmonize*

*With the giant waves, and the flat rocks
And the vast beaches which border the sea.*

*With a slow step and the cold eyes of indifference
Silently I would let myself be carried away;*

*To see how the blue waves break against the sand
And not stir;*

*To see how the birds of prey devour the small fish
And not sigh;*

*To think that the fragile boats might sink in the waters
And remain unmoved,*

*To see the most handsome of men approach
And not desire love...*

*To lose sight distractedly,
To lose sight and never to recover it;*

*And standing erect between sky and beach,
To sense the eternal oblivion of the sea.⁴⁷*

* * *

Back at Villa Victoria, the climate had transformed into one more temperate and mild.

Walking through the open gate, past the lavender then around to the back entrance, I saw no signs of Victoria the cat or the man with the silver beard. Did I imagine them? A little spooked, I walked over stones then up the cement steps, past potted plants and onto the tiled porch. The back door creaked open, lights glowed in several rooms and voices drifted out of the kitchen. I was in her house, standing on the same floorboards as not only Victoria but also Gabriela Mistral and Jorge Luis Borges. *In my childhood, adolescence and first blush of youth, I used to live in books what I couldn't live in life, because life was full of absurd taboos for a young girl in those days. Later, I lived in life what I had read about earlier in literature, and the literature paled in comparison. There was no alternative but to tell, in a more or less direct manner, what I had lived. What I had lived brought me to write and to read, not vice-versa.*⁴⁸ To the right of me was the

drawing room where Victoria had performed for her sisters; dressing up in her father's clothes, she created dramatic scenes of her own to act out. I looked up, to the wooden ceiling where white paint peeled off like dead skin. Well fed termites worked on the floor, pock-marked and smooth from years of busy feet. Turning towards the back garden, I gazed out of the windows. More chipped paint and a worn lock unfastened. From the window, I saw several stone benches. On the steps I had just walked up, Victoria posed for a photograph with her five sisters in 1911.

A slender woman greeted me, dressed in red with streaked hair that fell to her waist. She sat me down in the empty room before a TV screen. Rain began to tap against the windows. She pressed play on the video then told me she would return once the film finished. Victoria's voice immediately filled the room, stronger than the aromas from the kitchen, stronger than the relentless weather outside. It was a confident but old Victoria, speaking in stereo with grace and self-assurance. Like a ghost, her sturdy voice walked me through the house on the screen, the house I was currently in. She discussed her life as if she were speaking from the grave. *...we spend our lives on the edge of miracles, denying their existence on account of their very routines...In a word, we need a saint to point out a miracle before we notice that it exists, as we need a poet, a painter, and even a scientist to add the mystery of the stars to the flavour of the fruit. A child, master in the art of alchemy, lives in a world of transmutations that permit him to do without the good offices of those interpreters, so indispensable for adults.*⁴⁹

Once the video ended, the woman who had initially greeted me lingered in the doorframe. She told me to first have a look around on my own and afterwards, she would give me a personal tour. Several photos of Victoria lined the stairwell. She posed without

shame or shyness. Perfectly aware of her own beauty, she held the camera and commanded the scene. When I arrived at the top, the ultimate floorboard let out a shifting moan. I jumped out of fright into the closest room and when I looked around, I was mortified.

Ceramic bras hung from clothes racks. It seemed out of place in both content and context. In the next room, tarred stones lay in a perfect circle across the floor, encompassed by steel pigeons and paper people. I moved on, into 'Gabriela's' room. Bare, it looked out towards the side garden with a great window framing purple blossoms, petals and dewy shrubs. Apparently each room had been transformed into a theme room, named after the famous guests who had slept there. Wisteria, rose and pheasant woven wallpaper clung to every wall. I realised only an audacious woman would settle on such intricate images to surround her daily life, a woman like Victoria Ocampo.

After my own tour the woman, Celeste, joined me in Victoria's writing room, balancing on the second storey. A circular wall full of paint-chipped windows gave an eagle's view of the garden in the back. Victoria's gloves, books, hats and make-up lay behind museum glass. Time and generations of air were taking their toll on Victoria's living possessions; silk began to lose its lustre, paper had crumbled around the edges, feathers were ragged and blusher was no longer powdery but compact.

Celeste flicked back a strand of hair then approached me, her high heels counting out small measured steps. We conversed in Spanish and like other Argentines, she spoke as if her tongue was on fire but the difference now was that I was used to it. I leaned against the window's frame gazing out at the blooming hydrangeas. Celeste took another

frame, then told me how every piece of wood in the house was imported from England, that all the trees and plants in the garden came from China and Africa. Celeste rubbed her lips together, admitting that importing products from Europe to Argentina was popular for people in Victoria's class.

She continued to explain with dancing hands and eyes as we wandered into Victoria's bedroom. All the furniture, in addition to the wallpaper was imported from France. A floral canopy bed reclined beneath a waterfall of pale fabric, an ivory bureau with three folding mirrors sat adjacent. Beneath the bureau, a matching chair looked as if it had just been used, left in a position of invitation or perhaps, hasty departure. On the far side of the room, facing the double doors which led to a balcony, a massive wardrobe with roses for handles stood like a treasure chest, pleading for me to open it but at the same time warning me not to.

The bathroom came from England. Black and white linoleum lifted up from all corners, stained around the bottom edges of the bidet and toilet. Brass faucets held watermarks beneath their beak-like bends. We stared at the features, as Celeste (fuelled with rage) told me all about UNESCO and how in 1981, two years after Victoria died, they sold off all the furniture and artefacts in the house to raise money for Villa Ocampo in San Isidro. Later, she said, they sold Villa Victoria to Mar del Plata's council for yet more money for Villa Ocampo; however, the money went into private Swiss bank accounts and nothing was ever spent on preserving the house. The UNESCO stories were evolving and it appears they are not in anyone's good books. She insisted that the only reason Villa Victoria was a cultural centre today, is because it no longer belongs to

UNESCO. Celeste stamped her foot – ‘this is what happens in Argentina.’ Her Spanish grew faster. ‘This is the mess we are in.’

We walked into Fani’s room. She was Victoria’s maid, ‘given’ to Victoria by her parents upon marriage. *But the background of this Spanish woman was such that she was destined to live her life by my side and prove to me irrefutably that selflessness isn’t a myth and that a maternal and filial affection can be born without blood ties or educational parity – that it is purely and simply one of the many miracles of the heart.*⁵⁰ Fani was Victoria’s maid for forty-two years. Their relationship was interesting because although Fani did as she was told, Victoria often commented on how, *Everything that I did was sifted through (Fani’s) censorship.* They would fight frequently, where Fani would stand firm against Victoria’s fleeting tempers. To Victoria, Fani was not only a member of her family, she represented home. *Who could understand that to go home, for me, was to return to Fani? And that without Fani there would be no home to return to? ...Of the ‘give and take’ there was between us, I thought that night, the give was hers and mine the take. I know of no ‘island’ with which I could have shown her all that the ‘simplicity of her condition and the faithfulness of her service’ meant to me, and what it deserved, unless it be this island of my heart.*⁵¹

Although Victoria held Fani in high regard, her room, compared to the others, was small and the wallpaper was a simple maroon. It was tucked neatly away in a far corner of the house. The curators of Villa Victoria had transformed Fani’s room into a photo gallery; portraits of Victoria and Vivian Leigh, the members of *Sur*, Victoria with Borges and his doting mother filled the walls. What caught my eye was a photograph of Victoria towards the end of her life. She was still elegant with platinum hair, less make-up and

more wrinkles but up until that point, I did not know how Victoria had actually died. I assumed old age but Celeste corrected me. She told me to look at the way Victoria held her hand. It was covering her mouth because she had cancer in her upper palate. This cancer haunted Victoria for the last fourteen years of her life. Doctors gave her prosthetic replacements but in the end, Victoria lost control of her mouth; she could hardly speak.

Celeste insisted I look out of the window. We were no longer facing the garden but the left side of the house, and in the distance I made out a small structure where the caretakers had lived, a woman named Lena and her husband. They had two sons, Raul and Juan, and Victoria helped pay for one to study art. She was very generous with her wealth. Towards the end of her life, she sold off the surrounding eight acres of Villa Victoria to keep *Sur* afloat. But how did her sisters feel? Victoria inherited everything; her sisters received nothing. Did they hold animosity towards the eldest and most financially fortunate? Did they challenge Victoria's spending?

We concluded our tour in front of the gift shop, a former bedroom or perhaps a study, full of postcards, t-shirts, stationery, garden books and specialised Victoria Ocampo pens. Perhaps preserving the legend is more important than the truth? Or do we rewrite some of the truth for the famous after they are dead?

Chapter Fifteen

Biblioteca Nacional

The education of women is, in my judgement, one of the imperatives of our times, since the future depends on women. We must not spare any efforts in seeing that this so neglected education is improved and completed.

– Victoria Ocampo, in an article in 'La Prensa'

I decided it was time to explore the Biblioteca Nacional, the biggest library in all of Buenos Aires and where Borges worked for several long years. Up until this point I had been so busy meeting the locals, discussing the lives and work of Victoria and Alfonsina, that I had not really had the chance to go. But today proved perfect for reading.

It was easy enough finding the place, only I was expecting old, Italian architecture with perhaps a historic entrance and numerous revolving doors. What I eventually found was a very new, spaceship building with a looming dome, disguised spiralling stairs, dark tinted windows and a military feel to it. Stray cats ran around its levelled cement patios, homeless families rummaged through shopping carts full of cardboard.

The library stood beside an ancient hospital, with intricate carvings. From the protective distance of a long city block, the hospital looked attractive but as I got closer, it seemed abandoned. Broken windows and rubbish littered the overgrown grounds. Only when an ambulance stopped outside its dilapidated front stairs, with lights flashing and rear doors ajar, did I realise the hospital was very much in use.

Beyond the hospital, men sold bunches of jasmine to the cars stopped at the traffic lights, small children juggled and pregnant mothers rubbed their bellies as they watched the blind walk by with their guide sticks on wheels. The wind blew branches to the

ground and shopping bags to the air. I made my way up the spiralling steps, which led me to the front door of the library. The sky was cobalt blue; a few clouds dusted the horizon broken only by church steeples and skyscrapers. It felt like more like a Scottish autumn day than an Argentine spring. My lips grew chapped, my mouth and nose were dry.

Getting into the library was like visiting a prisoner in a high security prison – or at least what I would imagine it might be like. Upon entering, several young Argentines filled out day passes, holding their photo identifications in one hand, their notes in the other, all scribbling frantically to get through security first. Security wanted not only your name, address and passport number but also all relevant information from your native country. Once forms were filled out, a few selected visitors were permitted into the rickety lift. A uniformed porter then took us to the fifth floor, where a queue stretched to the four rows of flickering computers.

I waited over an hour for a shot at a computer, which answered author, title, location and availability questions. What struck me was that there were no visible books, no smell of paper or dust, no aisles or librarians with glasses perched on their noses. A bold sign pointed to a bar and restroom with a cracked door, reeking of tobacco. There was an island of a desk with an older woman behind it. She rustled papers, pulled the skin of her earlobe and organised a few stacks of books. Beside her, a security guard and alarm system frisked all who wanted to get to what appeared to be the reading side. Everything was being watched and monitored. It was a literacy detention centre.

When my turn at the computer came, I typed in Victoria Ocampo. 39 entries flashed up on the screen. I then typed in Alfonsina Storni. She had 91 entries. The rules permitted three books at a time, so I filled in my request and waited for them to appear on

the big computer screen. Sporadically, surnames appeared and the owners of those names rushed to claim their books. Irish, Polish, German and Italian names flashed in lime green like aeroplane departure schedules. It was fascinating to see such European diversity in an Argentine Library, an eclectic array of citizens all waiting for their chance to read.

Like the others, I waited until my name appeared in square light. The first book to come up was Victoria's *Autobiografía I*. I read through her Spanish words, intrigued but with a little tension, hastily scribbling down notes about her childhood: *Well, I wouldn't give in. With blood or without it, I would wash with cold water. I would climb the trapeze, bloody or not. And no power in the world would force me to have children. Babies that come out of the belly button. Pity not to be a chicken.*⁵²

My next book from the front desk was a biography of Alfonsina by Josefina Delgado. I gazed at the cover photograph; Alfonsina's face resembled that of a child. She had plump cheeks, thin lips that curled inwards and coarse chestnut hair that sat short around her oval face. Her eyes held great strength. She glowed with a thoughtful curiosity.

The light was disappearing from the sky and I did not want to get home too late, so I took a few more notes on Alfonsina's thoughts, *Many people have accused me of being influenced by poets I have never read. Even Lugones, talking to me about the book [La inquietud del rosal], told me that he had noticed a very obvious influence from the most fashionable French poets. So as not to appear ignorant, I did not ask him who they were, but the truth is that I work nine hours a day locked up in an office, so in the period of time that it took me to write the poems that were collected in this volume, I never had a chance to read much of anything at all. My poems were all born of a moment of great*

*anguish, and they are absolutely free of the influence of any models.*⁵³ I read as much as I possibly could then returned all books to the desk. I assumed that the Biblioteca Nacional's collection of books sat inside cryptic shelves on the floors below, floors where visitors are not permitted. Perhaps this was the only way of controlling borrowed items but it is strange to feel so confined in a place that is supposed to nourish the mind. No wonder Borges hated working here; now I can understand why.

I left with the feeling that something was hidden on one of the levels I had been forbidden to discover, something that the computer and the person who retrieves the books had failed to find. I walked through the streets looking for the 152 bus that would take me back to the Gardenhouse.

Chapter Sixteen

Café Tortoni

*Grateful flower, you stand out
above the green of your leaves,
like the blood of a wound,
Red...Red...*

– *Alfonsina Storni, from 'To a Rose'*

The ruby-lit sign of Café Tortoni shines across Avenida Mayo, reaching out over the wide busy street. Polished brass handles and wooden doors frame the glass-reflecting traffic, both on wheel and foot. Globe-shaped lights hanging like moonstones from the curve of the roof highlight plaques to Alfonsina and Carlitos. Snail coiled fixtures surround the lights giving off the essence of a selective, exclusive interior. A little kiosk selling sweets and cigarettes stands beside the front door. Above, frosted glass panelling stretches straight as crocodile teeth. The exterior resembles a theatre, promising something more than coffee for those who dare to venture inside. It is the oldest café in all of Argentina, or so they boast, established in 1858.

I suppose its reputation as Alfonsina's old hangout (as well as Borges's and Pirandello's) makes Café Tortoni a tourist Mecca, but locals also find her interior inviting. Without any further encouragement, I pushed myself into Tortoni's world of heated, close-up conversation. I chose a seat beneath one of the many traditional chandeliers decorated with Saturn rings, hanging in weaving rows from the stained glass ceiling.

On the opposing wall, Tiffany lamps sat in pairs. They were fireflies in this day turned night. Dark wood and giant mirrors accented the red pillars and international

portraits encased in gilded wallpaper. Writers wrote, tourists snapped, businessmen discussed and in the back room, men played pool. I could hear the rattle of backgammon dice and the hustling of waiters. Tucked away near the toilets, a room dedicated to Alfonsina stood empty.

I ordered coffee and a thick slice of chocolate cake from a waiter named Angel, who gave me a lot of his time. He would zip around the other tables but when he got to me, he set his notebook on the cold marble surface, smiled and asked why I was in his beloved country. I told him about my project and as he stroked his moustache, he said he knew Alfonsina's son Alejandro. Then he left me for an old man at the bar; they spoke, exchanging positions and within minutes the old man introduced himself as the Tortoni's owner. He explained how he had been in charge of café for the past forty-five years; that he had followed in his father's footsteps and after taking the seat beside me, began his story of Alfonsina.

'She was devoted to the artistic circle Emilio Centurión set up, they called it "La Peña". Centurión was a painter, you see – a painter. We hosted the La Peña meetings here at Café Tortoni.' He looked away momentarily to catch his thoughts. Everything was whispered. I leaned in to hear to his soft, strained phrases until someone tapped my shoulder. When I turned around and looked up, a man's large blue eyes held me.

'Tienes dinero?' he asked but before I could say or do anything, the owner had him by the cuff of his shirt and escorted him to the front door. Returning to his chair only to apologise, the old man wiped his hands on a handkerchief then disappeared into a back room.

Angel dropped bits of Alfonsina related material my way, eventually leading me to the table dedicated to her. There was a plaque above it, and beside it, a photograph of Hilary Clinton. An interesting clash of worlds and women but something to be admired; Café Tortoni, although filled predominantly with men, is dedicated to women.

* * *

Ana and I had agreed to meet at a sidewalk café in the Recoleta. First to arrive, I ordered an espresso. I thought about how far I had come since my first day in Buenos Aires; it was hard to believe that I arrived in the city with only two phone numbers in my pocket and a bag full of books, knowing no one. And now, here I was, sitting in a café waiting for Victoria Ocampo's niece and I had managed to get permission to visit Villa Ocampo, which in itself was no easy feat. It was a moment of great clarity and unbelievable relief. I wanted it to last forever.

Ana appeared, dressed in Chanel shades with her signature red suede boots and purse. Her face looked flushed. After adjusting her seat into the sunlight, she lit a cigarette. It burned slowly. She exhaled quickly then ordered a large bottle of sparkling water for the two of us. Eager to resume conversation, she brought the ashtray closer and began telling me how her husband had a friend who wanted to meet me for 'una cita,' a date. Disinterested but at the same time not wanting to insult Ana, I reminded her about R. She leaned over and squeezed my hand.

'Who cares? You're not going to fall in love. It's just for fun. I told my husband you wouldn't be interested but if you change your mind, he's a doctor.'

I told her no but thanked her all the same. I had no intention of cheating on R. Ana insisted I consider it. The Argentine way perhaps? Grinning, she picked up the

menu, raising it to just below her eyes. She steadied her grip and watched for my reaction.

‘Let me tell you about Dolores.’ Moving on from the subject of dating, Ana explained how she and her cousin Dolores once lived not so much in harmony but tolerance of each other in Silvina Ocampo’s mansion, now separated into three levels with eighteen apartments. Many of the Ocampo relatives, upon Silvina’s death, were given flats in the renovated estate, not far from where we were sitting.

‘Dolores is always teaching,’ Ana sighed as she slapped her menu on the table. The waiter, summoned with a wave, came running, adjusting his tray and apron. Ana ordered the last of the specials off the menu for both of us: a nicoise salad and tuna tart. A variety of rolls and butter arrived immediately; napkins were unfolded.

‘I’d never leave Argentina,’ she said buttering her bread. ‘This is my home. Everything is so friendly and familiar here. No matter what happens, I will stay.’

I paid for lunch to thank Ana and as we rose from the table, she wove her arm through mine telling me it was ‘no problem’. Nothing ever was with Ana. I also handed over two large boxes of Argentina’s finest chocolates for her and her mother Rosita. The guilt of forgetting wine for their lunch invitation had finally passed.

‘Thank you!’ She kissed my cheek. We strolled past housewives with pampered poodles on our way to her car.

Already late in meeting Dolores, I began to panic. It was 3:30, the time I had scheduled with van Hooff at UNESCO to be at Villa Ocampo. It was going to take me an eternity to adjust to porteño time.

We picked up Dolores from her flat on Liberator Avenue. Ten lanes of rushing traffic and Ana crossed them all with one blind sweep. Dolores was nothing like Ana and I sensed friction between them. Dolores was a conservative mother with an imposing tone. She told us she was too tired to converse in English, so we switched to Spanish then began our journey to San Isidro, discussing Victoria, UNESCO and the fall of *Sur*. From the back seat, Dolores handed me information in folders. Like a dedicated professor, she gave her lesson in bullet points. *I am a feminist. I would be ashamed not to be one, because I believe that every woman who thinks must feel the desire to collaborate as a person in the total endeavour of human culture. And this is what feminism means to me. First of all: it is, on one side, the right a woman has to participate in cultural work, and on the other, society's duty to offer it to her [...] To deny it to her would be immoral, like seeing her as an object, an extra human being, unworthy of work.*⁵⁴

Once off the highway and into the leafy suburbs, burning dry grass filled the air. Doors locked, windows sealed, we passed through several groups of indigenous protesters, poor workers beating drums and holding banners denouncing the government. Not far from them, parents wore Dior and well-fed children played in the front gardens of their private mansions. The exclusive San Isidro was most definitely the Argentine equivalent of Beverly Hills. Polished windows counted out the number of rooms and abandoned toys lay in clean gutters.

The car pulled up against the crumbling wall at the end of the deserted cul-de-sac. My ears rang and my mouth was thirsty. The distant chants of the protesters and giant swarms of what in Glasgow we call 'midges' swirled around us like a storm. We had entered some kind of ghostly lane, penetrated an invisible bubble. Nothing living seemed

to exist here, only still structures and aside from what hung in the distance, all was silent. I expected tumbleweed to roll by. The three of us climbed out of the car. Our shoes almost resonating against the gravel pavement, we stood with necks arched, before Villa Ocampo.

In my hand I clutched the printout of van Hooff's email, which was curt and specific. 'As per your request, we herewith authorise you to visit the garden and exterior of Villa Ocampo. Please inform us of the date and hour of your visit, at least two days in advance so that we can inform the security accordingly.'

I had replied to thank van Hooff, to give him a date and time, notifying him that Ana and Dolores would be accompanying me (I have never been able to lie). There were no further emails, which led all of us to believe that UNESCO approved. They would 'inform security accordingly' and that would be that. Perhaps I should have known better and kept silent about Ana and Dolores, my guardian angels disguised.

From the street, Villa Ocampo glowed pink. A deteriorating brick wall protected the enormous estate, mended in part with a cheap sealant that neither matched nor served its purpose. One heavy step and little bits collapsed into anthill mounds. Wild weeds from the garden reached out and over the wall. Tin cans and sweet wrappers nested in unruly shrubs. Still, with all of these misfortunes, behind all of this disrepair stood Villa Ocampo, its name chiselled into the rose-colored stone. Weathered scaffolding disguised the front of the building, an old construction sign hung beyond the wall, but with the strength of my imagination I could see this fabulous mansion alive with people.

Unimpressed by the state of things, Dolores pressed the buzzer and a security guard took his time coming to the gate. When he arrived, he was dressed in jeans and a t-

shirt. Dolores spoke in short sentences, explaining that we had permission from UNESCO to look at the house. He shook his head. Dolores began to lose her temper. I quickly showed him the copy of my letter from van Hooff. Uninterested, he shrugged it off, then immediately straightened his posture and with a new heightened authority said that he knew nothing about our intended visit. I kicked the dirt with my shoe, Ana lit a cigarette and Dolores took a long slow breath, giving the guard an all-knowing, familiar look.

Because Dolores was head of the Villa Ocampo Foundation, she knew the guard from her previous and perhaps secretive visits. She was battling to preserve the house as Victoria had intended and this little setback would not stifle her in any way. Words were exchanged. The guard shifted his eyes to me, then over to Ana. His pupils dilated as he placed his hands to the back of his neck. Did he feel sorry for us? Was he was terrified of Dolores? Whatever his reason, the wooden gate was opened. He stepped aside to let us in, leading the way with an extended arm. Herman van Hooff had betrayed me but Ana, Dolores and the security guard had not.

We passed beneath the scaffolding to get to the back garden, a neglected jungle of overgrown brush. Careful with my step, I felt the heat of the sun press down against my forehead. The grass was thigh high and a plane droned overhead. To the left of the path we were forming, a smashed staircase continued to support the fallen tree that had caused its damage.

‘That happened years ago and still, nothing has been done.’ Dolores mumbled as she pressed on, brushing bugs and branches from her face.

Above us, cracked windows and rotting shutters balanced beneath blackened emblems, borders and a sundial. Like a tombstone, the chiselled date of 1891 lingers, reminding all of Villa Ocampo's birth. Across the rim of the slate rooftop, white rods with star tips lined, a rusty weathervane creaked to the sighs of the wind and two parallel balconies supported rows of pawn-shaped statues.

I looked down to the wooden kitchen door, battered beyond belief. Gazing at the fountain full of moss and sludge, the gazebo disguised by vines and the lanterns corroded by rust, I understood why UNESCO had avoided my calls and put up such a fight. They should be ashamed. The state of the house was a disgrace. I sensed Victoria turning over in her grave in the Recoleta.

Resting at the base of the stairs, I closed my eyes to absorb Villa Ocampo's atmosphere. Despite the dilapidation of the house, there was an energy to the place. I opened my eyes to look without anger. I was sitting beside Ocampo's flesh and blood, on the steps she crossed over every day. Before me was the garden where she read, around me, the same vegetation, earth and sky.

As I glided through the garden, imagining Victoria beside me pointing out flowers she had imported from various corners of the world, Dolores spoke to herself. She picked ivy tentacles off the walls until only their tracks remained. Pruning the bird of paradise flowers with her bare fingers, she raged.

'Look at this!' Her brown eyes burning. 'What a waste...' Her sentence cut short as she stormed off picking up cigarette ends and soda cans along the way. Disappearing in the direction of a well, I noticed a bench beneath a shedding palm. It was the same bench Victoria had shared with Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. ...*On that afternoon*

*the sky continued to darken in some places and at the same time became more golden in others. I had never seen such heavy menacing and radiant clouds. These sulphurous yellows and leaden greys made the greens of the banks and the trees all the brighter. The river, true interpreter of our sky, was giving in its own way and in its own language the image of what it saw above.*⁵⁵

Because Tagore visited Victoria when her parents were still living, he spent his days at Miralrío, a nearby rented estate. In order for Victoria to pay for hiring such an exquisite home, she sold a diamond tiara. Only later when she inherited Villa Ocampo could she lodge her male friends such as Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene and Octavio Paz. It was here that many intellectuals and artists sought both refuge and inspiration.

Ana collapsed on the bench. After wiping the mud off her boots, she lit another Marlboro red, looked to Villa Ocampo and with a nudge hushed, 'my mother's family were *really* rich.' The guard peered over to us dubiously. 'I knew they had money but this, *this* is a lot of money.'

Dolores eventually joined us, rubbing her hands towards Ana with distaste.

'In Victoria's day, guests were not allowed to leave their cigarette ends in the garden but today, everything is left behind.' Dolores's comment only made Ana puff harder. She looked to me. 'Can you believe they were going to stick a shopping complex running right down to the river's edge?' She pointed out through the thick brush. I could hear an engine revving and the faint sound of running water. Obviously, nothing has taken place. At least, not yet.

Towards the end of our afternoon, the guard overheard me speaking with Dolores and Ana. He knew I was interested in seeing the inside of the house and invited me to

have a look. Both Dolores and Ana declined because of UNESCO's letter with specific instructions to 'visit the garden and exterior of Villa Ocampo' but I did not have anything to lose, except possibly my tourist visa and besides, I was not *technically* trespassing. The guard had invited me. His skinny frame led me into the foyer and it was at that precise moment that my stomach turned. The once exquisite marble floors, pillars and wooden walls were cracked and damaged beyond repair. Then the guard opened the door to the closet, which was the size of a room the Parisian wallpaper, pink with peacocks and twisting yellow flowers was peeling off the walls. It was as if something was dying right before my eyes and there was nothing I could do. The antique clock watermarked, the kitchen nearly levelled, its black and white tiles shattered and all of the windows glassless. From the foyer I could see the silhouettes of two flesh-coloured staircases meeting and melting into one, leading up to the rooms three storeys above where Dolores told me Victoria's personal library stood. Volumes of rare books that Ocampo had collected during her lifetime, many of which were signed by the authors themselves, now sit in damp boxes covered with mushrooms. I stood with my neck arched back, looking up towards the cleft and distant ceiling, as the guard told me how several homeless families had tried breaking into the house during the past two years.

'Más de veinte familias,' he was defiant. 'Tengo una pistola.' I did not want him to show me his gun. The look in his eyes turned vengeful. Something moved upstairs, there were footsteps, I was sure of that. A plastic cover shifted in the corner and I ran from the house.

The guard insisted we give him our names and passport numbers before leaving and as I turned around to take one last look, I wondered what would become of the place.

Even if Villa Ocampo never takes the shape of the artists' retreat Ocampo had dreamed of, surely it would be better helping the homeless than deteriorating in a desolate suburb?

We left Villa Ocampo despondent. How could something like this happen to a house and woman as prestigious and generous as Victoria Ocampo? The woman who helped her Jewish friends immigrate to Buenos Aires during WWII, with her own personal funds. The woman who published Borges when he was a young, unknown writer. The woman who defied gender stereotypes and drove through Buenos Aires in a short-sleeved blouse smoking, when it was forbidden. The woman who divorced her husband, even though it was shameful to do so in her time. The woman who stood for feminism, knowledge and a free Argentina. Victoria Ocampo was such a role model and yet, in the end, her legacy is squandered because she was abandoned by an organisation she trusted, UNESCO.

We dropped Dolores off in front of her flat with her maid waiting patiently at the entrance. I thanked her for everything and she told me if I ever needed to contact her I could do so via the Villa Ocampo website. Little by little, Dolores was trying to set things right. I wanted to help her but did not know how. It was then that Dolores turned to me, looking me straight in the eye.

'Make sure the rest of the world knows about Villa Ocampo and what they've done to Victoria.' I held her stare and promised her I would.

Chapter Seventeen

Alfonsina

*Tonight I look at the moon
white and enormous.*

*It's the same as last night
the same as tomorrow.*

*But it's foreign, because never
was it so huge and so pale...*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'Journey'

Outside the Sala de la Cultura Nacional, protesters exploded into a frenzy of firecrackers and drums. Men beat down on the taut hides with their bare fists. Faces became transfixed on passing cars, the drivers inside shaking but looking straight ahead. Clothing was burned and thrown on to the street. Chanting took over. Communal clapping, head nodding and stomping enveloped the normally quiet, governmental street.

The demonstration was directed against those tucked inside the Sala de la Cultura Nacional, associated with the Secretaría de Cultura and El Presidente de la Nación. Unfortunately or fortunately, the Sala de la Cultura was my destination. There I would meet one of Alfonsina's biographers, Carlos Andreola, who had invited me to watch the play *Alfonsina*, which was being performed in honour of her death. Alfonsina committed suicide on the 25th of October 1938.

Face bowed, sunglasses on, scarf swaddled tightly around my head, I rushed into the historic building fearful not only for my safety but also because of my apparent temporary shift to the other side of the political debate. Instead of supporting the people, I felt as if I was now on the government's side for the simple reason that I had stepped

inside one of their buildings. Of course, this was not the case but I still felt guilty just for entering. I had to constantly remind myself that I was in the building for art's sake, for Alfonsina and Carlos Andreola.

A guard opened the door for me, letting me slide through, sealing out the sounds of the revolution. Inside, the political palace was dressed as a museum, draped in red velvet curtains, Argentine flags and rare paintings. A door creaked open to the right of me. I heard voices. I walked over to the door and pushed. There was a series of chairs, fifty or so, bolstering old men and women with clipped ties and low heels. Some roamed the aisles, others chatted, grabbing for shoulders and sleeves. Without knowing what to do next, I tried looking for Carlos Andreola, even though I did not know what he looked like, hoping someone might help me. I was in luck. A young woman, the only other young person in the room, approached me. She took my hand and I followed her to a man with a silver moustache and glistening blue eyes. He was so excited that he kissed my cheeks, holding my arms in a kung fu grip. I assumed he was Carlos Andreola. We skipped over our own introductions.

'Suerte,' the woman who led me there wished, then moved back towards the door. Standing with hands clasped, Carlos proceeded to present me to everyone in his immediate company, including Alejandro Storni, Alfonsina's son. In a navy suit, vest and tie Alejandro stood at my height, his hair nearly gone, his glasses a little crooked. Large freckles spread over the back of his hands and the top of his head. Well over ninety, he leaned on his cane for support. The sagging skin of his face followed his moustache downwards. He spoke to me but I had trouble understanding. All of his words were softly sewn together. A large middle aged woman stood fastened to his arm, escorting him

around the room as if he was her prize. Suspiciously she rubbed the green eyeliner from her lower lids and with one brutal stare, told me to keep my distance.

Carlos could not stop rejoicing. The drapes were drawn, sealing our padded world from all that lay beyond. The play had been temporarily postponed until the protesters outside dispersed.

Patiently we sat in the front row, waiting for the play to begin. Carlos had saved me a seat between him and a woman missing a thumb. She pressed play on a handheld recorder with her index finger when a short muscular lady took to the stage, our host for the evening. Pacing from one end of the stage to the other, she thanked the government for providing its services and Amelia Bence for the performance she was about to give.

The lights dimmed and Amelia Bence began reciting *Las rosas* from the back of the room.

*Cuando mueran las rosas, cuando mueran,
En una tarde gris, tarde de frío,
Entre mis manos temblarán sus pétalos
Y poco a poco moriré de hastío...*

She continued speaking as she approached the stage, then settled in behind a podium with a book in hand. Ageing but glamorous, her face pulled back into a permanent grin, large earrings rocked with each step. Following in her voice and footsteps was a younger man, in a brown beret and blazer, pretending to be a lost spectator from the audience. His character knew nothing about Alfonsina and needed an explanation or so this story went. They untangled Alfonsina's life through her poetry, a keyboard player filled background space. *My character lends itself poorly to adulation and petty political manoeuvring, and in this sense I have always been my own worst*

*enemy. I know perfectly well that I lack the necessary talent to live by social formalities, and it is not because I do not know how, but because the whole idea repels me. I have always lived, and I shall continue to live, like a feather in the breeze, with no shelter of any kind.*⁵⁶

Amelia Bence recited Alfonsina's poetry as if she was Lady Macbeth speaking to crowds at The Globe, her projection stretching over the audience with operatic undertones, eyes drooped, microphone clipped to her magenta shawl. Little old ladies behind me, mirrored in rows, echoed the lines, indifferent to social rules or those around them. They knew all of the poems by heart, reciting them like bible passages in church.

*Tú que hubiste todas,
Las copas a mano,
De frutas y mieles.*

*Los labios morados.
No sé todavía.
Por cuales milagros.*

*Me pretendes blanca
(Dios te lo perdone),*

*Me pretendes casta
(Dios te lo perdone),*

Me pretendes alba!...

Then they started crying. And when Amelia's shawl caught on the chair while walking from one edge of the stage to the next, several of the old women behind me gasped in horror. They even called out to Amelia but she was completely transfixed on Alfonsina's words.

*Grateful flower, you stand out
above the green of your leaves,
like the blood of a wound,*

Red...Red...[...]

*The leading champions of your ideas
have copied the colour
of your leaves
for their flag.*

*And that's why I worship you,
beautiful flower, because above the leaves' green
you stand out
Red...Red...⁵⁷*

The finale arrived, a crescendo of keyboards and poetry swooping all viewers up in what could have been two invisible hands. The audience's suspension of disbelief was balanced in between two worlds – real and imaginary – until interrupted once again by great bombs of fireworks outside. Carlos leaned over to apologise. He was embarrassed that such turmoil was taking place during my visit. Assuring me that Argentina was a peaceful, proud country he believed such rebellious acts were shameful to all Argentine people.

The performance ended. It was a fantastic success that overrode the explosions outside, the sadness in their hearts, the age in their bones. Once the clapping subsided, I was inundated with questions and people. Amelia soon appeared with monologues reserved solely for Alejandro. Up close, she looked much older but there was a kindness glowing from her after-show buzz. Like all the others, she worshiped Alfonsina and she continued to be Alfonsina after the curtains closed.

Carlos whisked me from the crowd at the theatre to a half empty café. He chose a large table beside a mirror. He was so small I had to bend over just to speak with him. As we adjusted our seats, away from the mirror, he told me that his car was stolen from the front of his house then went on to tell me how dangerous things were, that before the

economic crash, one could safely walk the streets alone at two, even three in the morning, but now no one even tries.

Carlos gave me all sorts of brochures, flyers, articles and newspapers, which he signed with heartfelt messages.

‘You’ll mention me in your book?’ He asked, his grin hopeful, his pen still moving.

‘Of course,’ I told him as he continued to autograph newspaper articles, emphasising the fact that he put up Alfonsina’s plaque at Café Tortoni and that he has unpublished letters and poems of hers tucked safely away at home. What will happen to all of her work when Carlos dies? Will it grow soggy from foul weather, bad politics and sprouting mushrooms?

Chapter Eighteen

No Daisies

*...But farther away, my vision never saw
such a clean moon and sky.
While people shiver, that sky is a
beautiful irony.*

*Almost as if a voice that descended
from the disdainful clean blue
mocked their discomfort saying to them,
"Now listen to me!"*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'Coldness'

Barney Finn told me I could find him at the Teatro Andamio later that afternoon. His phone voice created the image of a large, rough bearded smoker, with a director's tendency towards quick bursts of annoyance. The streets leading there were lined with kiosks, confectionery, fading apartment blocks and busy parks. I lingered beneath frayed awnings for a break from the rain. I fingered the red dragon-faced petals of the *flor de ceibo* trees, Argentina's national flower. Children with pigtails played in the park and rushed towards my camera when I adjusted the lens. 'Take one of me!' They shouted in unison, not shy or intimidated. 'Of meeeee!'

The walls of the theatre were painted black, the ceiling in the foyer was low. Posters and reviews of previous shows papered the thin and tapered walls, leading to an empty stage in the back. A thoughtful woman behind the ticket counter told me Barney was on his way, that I should wait on the bench beneath the reviews. I sauntered over, skimming through articles, noting the celebrated performances and black and white photographs.

Barney was the opposite of what I had expected; a stout, beardless man and like most Argentines, he arrived fashionably late. I approached him warmly, eager to introduce myself; he looked at me with complete uninterest, then without any formalities, told me to wait for him across the street in a café. Shocked not only by his lack of etiquette but also his directness, I left the darkness of the theatre to find the café across the street. Only there were two. I picked the smaller one with cut daisies waving from wine bottles on each of the tables.

Fifteen minutes later Barney arrived and asked if I had ordered anything. I told him I had not.

‘Bueno,’ he said in a monotone murmur. ‘Vamos al otro café.’ Apparently, I had chosen incorrectly.

We sat down and he fussed with his chair, switching seats, cleaning surfaces with an immaculate handkerchief. He ordered hot black tea from the waitress. She looked at him. He ordered it again, impatiently. When the tea arrived, he argued with her because it came with a free croissant. She had to repeat that the croissant was free, he would not be charged and could leave it or eat it. The choice belonged to him. Barney’s nose shifted upwards, his chin was as sharp as an arrow. He reached for the saccharine and with sachet in hand, shooed the waitress away.

I began our conversation with questions directed towards Barney’s work. He recommended I see his film, *Cuatro Caras para Victoria*. He told me he had read everything written by her and about her before he made it. He spoke as he arranged the saucer and cup symmetrically on the table, telling me I could buy his film from a video

shop near by. 'Blackmans,' he carefully spelled the name out for me. I would also find the film *Alfonsina* directed by Kurt Land there.

Barney picked at his croissant like a starling. He sipped his tea carefully. Believing the way to his soft side was through the theatre, I mentioned that I had been involved with the theatre back in Glasgow, most recently in Tennessee Williams's play *Not About Nightingales*. His brown eyes focused on me temporarily and as he finally bit into the rummaged croissant, he remarked how he had seen the play's premiere in London with Corin Redgrave. He chewed and looked away. There was no denying it, he was annoyed and felt his time was being wasted in my company.

* * *

The street leading to Blackmans was drenched in rose tinted light. It soothed me and somehow, I felt as if I was walking home. This part of the city was tucked away from the hum of the centre. Here mothers holler at their children from windowsills, boys ride on the handlebars of their friends' bicycles and grandmothers stop to talk with each other, their arms teeming with fresh local produce.

I arrived just before closing time. Blackmans was no bigger than a shed and if Barney had not given me directions, I never would have found the place. A glass door, the kind that leads you from a house into a garden, proved to be the entrance. It opened with a suction sound. A cowbell rattled. The distinct aromas of wet fur and freshly printed film took over my sense of smell. Dozens of cats hung from bookshelves and boxes, even more lay scattered across the floor.

A round man in reading glasses sat behind the desk. Behind him, all sorts of faded videos lined the rack. 'Buenas noches,' he said with the contemplation of a fisherman. I

told him Barney Finn had sent me, that I was looking for *Cuatro Cara para Victoria*. He welcomed me like a long lost daughter then called to his wife in the back room. She appeared with a cat in arms, hair wild, layers of purple clothes covered in fur. They stood arm in arm asking me all sorts of questions about my background. They were so kind and as I stroked the various cats, they looked for films on Victoria and Alfonsina for me. And what they did not have today, they said they could have by tomorrow.

After much rummaging and several trips to the back room, where machines creaked and film burned, three videos were produced: Barney Finn's *Cuatro Caras Para Victoria*, Kurt Land's *Alfonsina* and a documentary on Victoria, created for the 'video coleccion artes y artistas,' plainly titled *Victoria Ocampo*. I could not wait to get back to the Gardenhouse to watch them.

Chapter Nineteen

Tears

*...The air has no weight;
the doors stand by themselves
in the emptiness;
they disintegrate into golden dust;
they close, they open;
they go down to the algae
tombs;
they come up loaded with coral...*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'Departure'

I sat on the balcony watching a robin build her nest. Dipping through the sky, she collected twigs, weeds, bits of leftover fabric and laundry lint. The air was sticky against my skin. Humidity clung to even the driest of surfaces. Transfixed by the busy little bird, I tried to relax and in doing so, started to shamelessly cry all over again. I desperately missed R. and for the first time since my arrival, I wanted to go home.

This series of events began in the wee hours of the morning. A few new people arrived at the Gardenhouse; a couple of Irish and another Aussie telling me that Frank McCourt was a liar, that he made up characters in *Angela's Ashes* and that he could not return to Limerick because everyone hated him there. After thrusting this random piece of information my way, they decided that they wanted to go clubbing but did not have a key. I lent them mine, which was a big mistake. They lost it almost instantly. Then the Dutch girl's Peruvian bodybuilding boyfriend appeared with flexed muscles and polished teeth. He had spent three days on a bus travelling from his remote farming village in Peru to Buenos Aires without any food and little water. Argentine customs were sceptical so, the

Dutch girl campaigned for his passage, paying his way with hundreds of pesos and numerous sponsorship forms.

Within minutes, the Dutch girl and her man were making loud love in the room next door. Their bed pounded against the wall, causing shutters to bang and all of my books to fall from shelf to floor. Aside from feeling a little envy, it was impossible to fall asleep. But as soon as I did, the Irish and the Aussie fell through the front door grinding their teeth from the copious amounts of ecstasy they had swallowed in the club. It was 8a.m. I needed a walk.

The river was a few miles away. I passed over rusty railroad tracks, beside billboards advertising canned ham and politics. Metal rubbish baskets on sticks lined my path. The sky began to cloud over. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, my stomach let out a horrific groan. It churned in harmony with the river. Sickness was seeping out from both ends of me, all at the same time.

Limping with one hand over my mouth, the other clenched tight to my abdomen, I found a toilet in a corner café where I was sicker than I have ever been in my entire life. It was awful. I washed my face in the sink, catching my reflection in the cracked mirror. I was green, grey circles magnified my sunken eyes, sweat drenched off my exhausted body. Realising that my only option was to sleep off whatever it was that I had, I dragged myself back to the Gardenhouse.

Instead of letting myself in, I had to ring the doorbell because I no longer possessed a key. Doubled over, I continued to push the buzzer as tears of pain and rage streamed down my face. Even though the house was full, all lodgers were too lazy or busy to answer the front door.

I persisted but still no one answered. I sat on the ground in front of the gate realising that if someone did not answer soon, I would be sick all over myself. I tried one last time and the Californian guy, who had returned the night before from his girlfriend-seeking journey up north, opened the door casually.

‘Hey, how are you Fi?’ He said with his arms open wide.

‘Could you please open the door – NOW!’ I was ready for an argument and pledged to throw up on him if he did not get moving. When he finally managed to unlock the gate, he nestled into me for a hug. I swapped my body for my bag then ran for the toilet.

When Martín later told all guests that the Gardenhouse was coming to an end, I could not say I was sorry to leave. However, there were a couple of things on my mind. I asked him where Junior would go.

‘Junior died. You didn’t know?’

Gasping for breath, tears filled my eyes – yet again. ‘Why didn’t anyone tell me?’

‘Hey, listen – ’ Martín wiped a tear from my face; it was quickly replaced by another. ‘I’m just kidding. Junior isn’t dead. He’s at my grandmother’s apartment. I didn’t want him anymore. But seriously, do you have a light?’

At that moment in time, something uncontrollable filled me. Rage and animosity erupted from a very deep place. ‘How could a joke like that be funny? You’re a bastard, Martín. *Un pinche pendejo.*’ I had learned numerous Spanish swear words in Mexico City. Finally they were proving useful. Martín stared at me. His unlit cigarette fell to the floor and I walked upstairs to pack my things.

I do not know why I had thought that the extended construction taking place at the Gardenhouse was to better the conditions of the guests. How stupid am I? Two very rough builders had moved into the house two weeks ago, shifting furniture to an unknown location. Cockroaches were coming out of the walls. Plastic and paint filled the hallways. The hot water no longer worked. I could not remember the last time I had actually had a warm shower. Even the beds were gone.

In conjunction with Martín's humour and departure message, I learned that his mum had agreed to rent the house out to a family four weeks previously. But what infuriated me most was his family's abandonment of Edith. She had been working for them for five years, six days a week, sixteen hours a day without any holidays or sick leave, and was given four days' notice to find another job. It was disgraceful and because she was working illegally, there was nothing she or I could do. Like most people in her situation, she had to walk away.

When I paid Martín my last week's rent, I shaved a generous portion off the top and handed it over to Edith along with a substantial tip to get her started with her new life. She told me she would be fine, that she could not take the money but I insisted. She reassured me that she had friends in El Tigre and would stay with them until she found work but I still worried about where she would go and how she would survive. With swollen eyes, we said goodbye and from the gate of the Gardenhouse Edith waved until she was a faint image in the distance.

* * *

Alone in the city and in dire need of new accommodation, I searched through the *Lonely Planet's* recommendations (buckling against my will). The Castilla Hotel looked

promising, quoted as being ‘a good budget find for women...busily decorated open space...great tiled floor...and a large terrace.’

Yes, it was centrally located but in a dangerous part of town. The face of the ancient building was crumbling; a broken sign and tattered staircase led me inside. Engraved into the wall, a caption read that this was a woman’s shelter. *A shelter?* Curious, I rang the bell.

A frazzled but friendly woman answered, draped safely in a shawl. The veins of her hands looked like an atlas, her scarlet lipstick bled into the creases around her lips. I asked if I could see a room. She took my hand and pulled me in.

The place smelled of flea collars. The rooms were cheap but the only other time I have seen a place like this was when I accidentally ended up in a brothel in San José, Costa Rica. Actually, if memory serves me correctly, the *Lonely Planet* recommended that place too. I made sure I saw a room first this time. The woman with the atlas hands took a key off the hook on a numbered plywood board, then slowly opened the door to a room near her counter.

‘A couple from New York arrived today,’ she said in Spanish with a gravelly voice. The phone rang and she left me to look, alone with all of the couple’s belongings. With each step I flattened down the black bubble linoleum, curling up off the floor. Although the beds were not sheeted in plastic, they were covered in very old chestnut spreads that again smelled, this time of dampness and mould. The mattresses caved inwards, a tiny lamp in the corner crackled with light. The room had a distinctive horror film feel to it and I wanted out.

When the woman returned, she offered to show me the communal kitchen and shower. I wanted to refuse but instead, followed with caution. We passed several old ladies on the way. Some spoke to themselves while others whistled high-pitched tunes. The shower had various things growing in it; something squeaked in the corner. Tugging my arm, she led me to the kitchen. The two of us could hardly stand side by side in it. Once in the lounge, crowded with synthetic plaid furniture, she told me that there was only one room left and I would have to make my mind up quickly before it was taken. Leaving the building as fast as my legs permitted, I proceeded to the Millhouse Hostel.

Smack dab in the middle of town, the hostel took up three storeys of a newly-renovated historic building. There was a security system, spiralling stairs, a busy reception area, large kitchen, common room and a central courtyard, letting in plenty of light and fresh air. All of the rooms had French doors, firm beds and clean bathrooms. Local staff and international travellers filled the hallways with cheerful banter. It was as good as I was going to get for the price and would suffice for the remainder of my time in the capital. With my backpack as well as a few stranded travellers from the Gardenhouse, we landed on the front door of the Millhouse later that afternoon.

The first things I unpacked were photographs of R. and my family. I placed them on a dresser, propped up by the seashells I had gathered in Mar del Plata.

After a hot shower and change of clothes, I headed for the lounge with my journal. The Millhouse was a typical backpackers hostel (a place I promised myself I would avoid but continuously ended up in) with a crowded lounge area, overpriced in-house shop and plenty of wooden tables and chairs. I bought a beer, chose a table by the window then made myself comfortable. Backpackers surrounded me and I could not help

but listen to them laugh, drink, smoke and talk amongst themselves. They all seemed to know each other, even though I knew most had probably met only yesterday. Travelling does that to you. Close friendships are established overnight. Drinking my beer, my thoughts focused on one particular group of travellers. I wondered why they had decided to leave home in the first place. Adventure? Experience? Self-knowledge?

The longer I tried to write, the more I found myself listening to the strangers around me and the lonelier I felt. I missed my family in San Francisco and R. back in Glasgow. Even though I was somewhere between both cities geographically, I was still thousands of miles away and the distance hit me hard. *I was leaving a safe harbour that had sheltered me for many years; that had strengthened me but also made me languish...two voices were dictating different orders to me: one that I should take refuge at whatever cost in the security of an uncomplicated happiness...The other voice shouted: 'Lord preserve us from the numbing effect of sheltered harbours. Force us, Lord, to let go...'*⁵⁸

* * *

On Vlady's suggestion I contacted Eduardo Paz Leston, an old acquaintance of Victoria's and the editor of *Cartas de Angelica* (he also wrote the latest prologue to Victoria's *Testimonios Series sexta a décima* and has translated some of Borges's work). His voice was measured as he told me to meet him at his house, not far from the Biblioteca National, at noon.

The neighbourhood stood in the shadows of several drooping jacaranda trees. Their soft purple blossoms paved my way to his apartment building. Restaurant patrons

arranged tables and chairs for outdoor seating. Red tablecloths and awnings shook with the gentle breeze.

When I pressed Eduardo's buzzer, a woman answered. She told me to wait, that Eduardo would be down shortly. I watched people pass; women with wicker baskets dangling from their arms, men in dark suits and sunglasses. When the glass door flung open, Eduardo stared at me. He held his fingers over his mouth. I was much younger than he had expected, he repeated – *so young*, several times. After lifting the waistband of his trousers and running a hand over his shiny head, he told me we were going to his favourite café.

The café had a bar as well as a series of old wooden tables and chairs. Three old men sat scattered around the room drinking coffee. They turned the pages of their books in unison. Eduardo suggested we sit in the corner beside the open window. The man from behind the bar strolled over, tightening the strings of his apron, shifting them to the front.

Eduardo spoke as he moved, in fleeting jolts that shifted and veered this way and that. His manicured fingers protected his mouth every time he felt a smile coming. We conversed entirely in Spanish over a table so low and tiny, I struggled to cross my legs.

When Angelica Ocampo died, one of Victoria's sisters, Silvina Ocampo, asked Eduardo to go to the flat and collect some of her things. He arrived as a janitor was leaving the building for the dump; hands full of black and white bin bags. Eduardo inquired about the contents of the bags and the janitor handed them over. Inside were dozens of letters from Victoria to Angelica, marked and aged but still legible. All the letters were on light blue stationery, the colour of a robin's egg, which was Victoria's favourite kind of stationery. After rescuing the letters, Eduardo compiled them into his

book *Cartas de Angelica*. Not long after the book's publication, Peter Johnson at Princeton bought the letters for the University's library. Dolores kept a few of the letters but Princeton and Harvard house a majority of them. Eduardo mentioned that in Victoria's will, she gave both universities various pieces of her work with the clause that they make two copies of everything. She asked for one of the copies to be sent to the Biblioteca Nacional but when I was there, the letters were not listed in the computer's catalogue.

After the café, we walked to La Barca bookshop, another one of Eduardo's local hangouts. The shop was cosy with high ceilings and tables of small publications. Rose incense burned behind the desk, a small boy played with a plastic tractor on the floor. Eduardo led me to the shelf with his book. There was one copy, which I bought in addition to the complete collection of Alfonsina's work. *When I went out into the world and observed things with my own eyes, not with the limitations imposed on my sex, but as a person who can forget about such things...I found that men and women had assumed battle positions. The former were hoping to obtain some pleasurable tidbits, while the latter were trying to find someone to feed them. I found that, on a global scale, women possess as many virtues and defects as men, but that they are each of a different type.*⁵⁹ As a life in continuous battle, Alfonsina suffered but she lived for her suffering; everything was bittersweet and it was the pain and inequalities in life that inspired her to write, to live and ultimately, to die.

Eduardo left me in the bookshop. His maid prepared his lunch, every day, for two in the afternoon and he did not want to be late. Before rushing out of the bookshop, he turned on the heels of his shoes and asked if I would meet him again.

‘Next time, you will come to my house,’ he promised in Spanish, his hand remaining over his mouth. ‘I will give you a *Victoria* tour of the city.’

Chapter Twenty

Queen

I was born to act. I have the theatre in my blood. I am a great artist and, without the theatre I can have no joy or peace. It's my vocation. The far niente to which I am condemned kills me.

– Victoria Ocampo

China Zorrilla and I arranged to meet for afternoon coffee. She informed me over the telephone that she would be leaving for Uruguay in the morning and insisted we speak in person before she left. I could not wait to meet this legendary Latin American actress and had a long list of questions prepared.

On the way to China's flat, I walked up Avenida Alvear in search of a gift. Chocolates seemed fitting, but finding a shop that sells boxed confectionery in Argentina is not as easy as it is in Britain. I passed angora, tie, briefcase, key and kitchen shops but a chocolate shop could not be seen for miles. Hopeful, I pressed on and as I did, I remembered why Avenida Alvear sounded familiar. It was where, as a small child, Victoria saw a horse beaten with a whip. *In the days when there were still many empty lots along Alvear Avenue, we would always go that way for our daily promenade because, as I later learned, my mother believed that even babies should be taken outdoors in all seasons. One day, returning from that systematic ventilation to which we were subjected, I saw something in one of those lots that suffocated me with shock and horror. A man had tied a poor, lame horse to a tree and was beating it violently with a whip. The animal struggled, reared up, and tugged in vain at the rope that held it prisoner. The man whipped relentlessly.*⁶⁰

A doorman dressed in uniform stood beside the door. His stern face broke when he recognised someone, a fellow doorman or passing maté vendor. Words were exchanged, cigarettes were lit and his statue-like posture temporarily melted into one with the living.

The glass panel on each door sparkled. The black and white checker tile in the lobby squeaked against the soles of my boots. Potted plants, their leaves spilling out in bright lime shades, reached in between the elevator doors. When I pressed China's buzzer, a voice at the other end gently told me to take the stairs.

'El apartamento está en el primero piso.' The corridor was lit by a tube of neon light. 'Camina señorita. Es más fácil.'

A woman of Caribbean origin stuck the top part of her body through the space in the open door. I could see her from the bottom of the staircase, her hair tucked away in a blue bandanna, her apron soiled from some kind of rich orange soup and her hands still damp even before she took my broken umbrella. She asked me to wait for China in the sitting room, led me through to an antique sofa then returned to the kitchen. I could hear her singing to herself. Water was running. The gas stove clicked on. Her voice floated into the living room along with the savoury aromas she had created.

Sitting up straight on the edge of a silk cushion, my notebook pressed tight against my chest, I let my eyes wander. Paintings clung to the walls and leaned against footstools in pairs. There was a portrait of a woman facing me. Her eyes looked towards the balcony. The brushes of oil paint, thick and layered, forced blues and reds into purples and greens. I followed the portrait's eyes towards the great bruises of grey spread through the skyline, tar-black clouds promised rain for at least a week.

*Colourless, icy,
the houses –
niches in a row –
huddle against
each other.*

*The sun
plays
in distant
gardens;
its remote steps
depress
the sky.*

*The smoke plumes
can't find it:
staggering since their birth,
they hug the crosses
and clutch the domes.*

*There was a river on the shore
of the city...
it has started walking
too,
into the sea
with silky
feet.*

*Or has the misty yawn
of the afternoon
slowly swallowed it?⁶¹*

The lamp beside me brought the only light into the room. It washed out and over the hardwood floor like candlelight. The ticking of an old clock above the marble bureau made me cautious of time and how much had passed since I had arrived. The top of my head as well as a photograph of a young woman reflected off the mirror on the far side of the room. I stood up to look at the image.

It was black and white, as large as a window. The young woman stood beside a newly sculptured vase. She gazed downwards with a sultry promise. Her features

resembled Grace Kelly's – blonde hair just touching the tips of her narrowing shoulders, slimness accentuated by a 1950's style tailored suit, high cheekbones and pouting lips. She was completely comfortable in front of the camera and what appeared to be her hard earned fame. An older man with clay covered hands sat beside the vase. He looked to the woman with a pure kind of love. She was clearly more important to him than the vase, only the young woman looked away from the sculptor. Her giant eyes twinkled with ambition and an unsatisfied hunger.

The furniture stacked intimately together in the room looked as old if not older than the photograph. Engraved wooden armrests, worn Persian rugs, crystal glasses and gold picture frames stretched from one dark corner of the room to the other. In the shadows, a painting of a clown leaned against the back of another sofa. The shape of the clown's mouth, the curls in its hair, the circles in its streaked cheeks were haunting. An embroidered cushion distracted me. It read, *Being Queen Isn't Easy*. The clock ticked over to the quarter hour. I bit my nail. It tasted of city grime. I moved on to another, tasting much like the first.

The exchange of two voices rose in the kitchen. A squirrel-sized dog took a running leap onto the *Being Queen Isn't Easy* cushion. It chased its tail, collapsed, perked up its pyramid ears then ran back into the kitchen. It repeated this two more times until two silhouettes began to shuffle from the kitchen through to the hallway. The maid led China's struggling steps towards me. I rose as she entered. She motioned to me with her hand, kissed my face then told me to take a seat at the dining table.

Although China was old (I assumed in her seventies) she was still beautiful. She had the same eyes as the woman in the photograph. I placed my notebook on the table

and gave China the chocolates I had searched high and low for on Alvear Avenue. She unwrapped the box.

‘The photograph you were admiring is my father and me,’ she said just before popping the truffle into her mouth. Out of nowhere the little dog jumped onto China’s lap, then the table. Its long claws scratched against the freshly polished surface, tip-tapping as it jumped and bounced.

‘This is Flor. I named her Flor because she was born in the spring. I am her slave.’ As China spoke, she continued to stroke the tiny creature’s long brown hair. She straightened the ribbon on the top of its head then asked her maid to bring the coffee in with a slow refined English accent.

Black coffee was served immediately. China denied herself another chocolate but poured sweetener along with sugar into her cup. I took notes and she explained how she had spent the first four years of her life in Paris. Like Victoria, China also had five sisters. She told me that Victoria wore *alpargatas* everywhere, shoes made of cloth, fastened with string and resembling ballet slippers. Although they were not fashionable at the time, China told me that Victoria did not care what others thought of her. Victoria believed she could wear whatever she liked, and did.

‘Victoria could have been a great actress,’ China admitted, sipping her sweet coffee. ‘In 1932 Victoria acted in the play *Puseton* at the Colón and in 1972, I followed in *her* footsteps. I observed all of Victoria’s moves. Victoria did not know. Victoria was a character in search of an author. She was always observing. Did you know that Victoria wrote a play about her time in jail?’ I shook my head. ‘She wanted me to be her in the play.’

When I asked China if she could remember a scene from the play, she looked to the floor and in a more dramatic tone, described it for me.

‘The guard knocks on her door and knows who she is. He’s taking her to another cell and she tells him to wait because she has “forgotten something important – her toothbrush”. She once told me how she scrubbed the bathrooms in that prison so clean, one could actually eat off them. She made friends with the prostitutes in jail. She loved with such intensity and was so brave.’ China’s focus shifted to Flor sleeping on the *Queen cushion. It was in Buen Pastor prison. We had just finished our not very appetising meal and were washing the dishes. A nun warned us that two new political prisoners were going to join us that night. The news only pleased us partially; from the point of view of our small egoisms, we would have less space in our room. Moreover, we would have to accustom ourselves to sharing everything with two new fellow prisoners when we had just begun to adapt to a routine, to feel more at home, and to know each other better. But to compensate for those inconveniences there was the curiosity of talking to women who were coming from the outside world and would perhaps bring us news. Then too, we sympathised beforehand with any political prisoner. If I recall correctly, a nun told us that the ‘new ones’ would probably be tired and hungry. I remember that we brought out clean plates and helped make the two as yet unoccupied beds.*⁶²

I shifted our discussion to *Eva y Victoria*. Had Evita and Victoria met in real life? I remembered Doris Meyer writing about their brief encounter in her biography *Victoria Ocampo: Against the Wind and the Tide*. ‘Surely they recognised each other that one time their paths crossed in front of an elevator in the Buenos Aires clinic; the glamorous,

blonde, former radio actress from the provinces thinking, perhaps, that the wealthy aristocrat thirty years her senior was no longer to be as envied as she, the wife of Juan Domingo Perón. So *that* was “Evita”, thought Victoria, and all she could see before her was an unscrupulously ambitious young woman who had proclaimed herself the fanatical disciple of a demagogue.’⁶³

‘They did meet, didn’t they?’ I asked.

‘Well, if they did it would have only been briefly. Are you familiar with the play?’

I told her I was and that I knew Monica.

‘Oh, Monica.’ China’s voice grew melodic. ‘She wrote the play then rang my doorbell. All she would say was that she had a great part for me.’

China went on to tell me that the reason why the play worked so well and ran for so long was that *Eva and Victoria* represented the extremes of life. Both women loved Argentina passionately. Victoria helped Argentina grow and with her money, she exposed Argentina to the rest of the world. She also brought writers like Graham Greene, who China described as ‘the tall good-looking English man’ and the renowned Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore to Argentina. Victoria thought that through nurturing culture, change could happen.

According to China, while Victoria was building alliances through literature Eva was building homes for the poor. She was not educated but could connect to the Argentine people because of her own humble beginnings. The contribution of both women working together would have been incredible.

I asked China about her most memorable performance as Victoria. She closed her eyes, joined her hands together then spoke of a night when ‘the audience was consumed by the moment when Eva begs Victoria, “I’m asking you to be my contact...help me”. It was the longest pause in the *history* of the theatre.’ China’s emphasis on *history* was an auditory punch, ‘then someone from the audience shouted out “Help her”. That would have to be my most memorable performance as Victoria.’

China lifted Flor onto her lap. ‘You know many people hated Perón but everyone loved the play. I thought it would never end, that I would have to be Victoria forever. I also played Victoria in the film *Cuatro Caras para Victoria*. When we were filming, the woman playing Fani cried when she saw me dressed as Victoria. It was as if she had seen a ghost.’

‘What about Victoria as a person?’

‘She listened well and enjoyed giving orders. When meeting with friends, she discussed literature and politics with great passion. If she were alive today, I wonder what she’d say about the Chechens holding those hostages at the opera and how badly the Russian military handled the situation. What a horrific tragedy. There is no peace in the world.’ She shook her head. The muscles of her jaws clenched beneath the wrinkles of her powdered skin.

I asked her what she enjoyed doing most with Victoria. ‘Having tea.’ China’s voice perked up. ‘Tea with Victoria was always of the highest calibre – it was a true experience. The cakes, scones and marmalade were always delicious. Victoria loved cakes and when she stayed in Mar del Plata, every day she would go for a walk at 4p.m. because that’s when her favourite bakery took its last batch of pastries out of the oven.’

The first time I saw Victoria was in Mar del Plata at the Sala Gregorio Nachnam Theatre.

Victoria and I passed on the stairs. She said nothing but called me the next day for tea.

This is how we met. I was reading the newspaper in Montevideo when I learned of

Victoria's death. I still have the letters she sent me. She always wrote her letters on pale blue stationery. The name Victoria has a musical sound to it. Victoria could not have had any other name, not Mercedes or Maria – only Victoria. It was the perfect name for her.'

'Could I take a photo señora?'

'Of me? Oh no! My hair and make-up are not done! But you are a darling young lady and may contact me again. It was very nice to meet you.'

On that note, she took my arm and escorted me to the door. The kitchen smelt of boiling apricots. Marta had disappeared and as the door closed, I walked down the stairwell, back through the lobby and into the warm rain.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tango

It bothers me to be a woman because through sheer common sense I have had to give up all my old defences, and yet I am left with the usual disadvantages of my sex. Other women, however, are still making hypocrisy such a way of life that they seem to be the normal ones, while I, by contrast, look out of place.

– *Alfonsina Storni*

The clear darkness of the evening made Avenida de Mayo look different. During the day it buzzed with bodies and pavement stalls but at night it was cold and quiet. Puddles beneath street lamps marked each empty corner. My shadow stretched as long as the sound of my footsteps. I walked to Café Tortoni from the nearby *subt  * station, fully aware of my presence and pace. Just off the main street, I noticed the silhouette of a young girl in ragged over-sized shoes. Her hair was wild and she stood behind a cluster of bins clutching several plastic bottles. She spoke to the bottles as if they were dolls, locked her eyes with mine, then vanished.

When I got to Caf   Tortoni, I leaned against the wall and waited. A few couples passed by me on their way to the tango show, their hair appropriately slicked back. Eventually the young girl with the plastic bottles found me again and this time, she asked for money. I reached in my bag and gave her what I had been saving since I arrived, my two-peso note. Its luck would be better with her than with me.

Fifteen minutes later the Dutch girl and her boyfriend appeared in the back of a Peugeot taxi admitting they were too full of steak to walk any real distance. The Dutch girl paid the driver while her boyfriend kissed my cheeks. I was happy for them but had my doubts about her Romeo's intentions. Of course it is wonderful when a relationship

works, when two souls have been separated by circumstance, only to be reunited by passion, love and determination but things did not look very balanced in their garden of Eden, at least, not from the outside.

The Dutch girl was adamant they stay together, no matter what. She even offered to marry and provide for him if the cards fell that way. What worried me was that, it seemed, she could not see the road signs flashing *caution*. She was already supporting him financially and had been since the day they met, a short but impressionable four months ago. I sensed she was being taken for a ride but because she was in love, she could not or would not admit that ‘the most attractive man she had ever been with’ was a player. I wanted to be wrong but my intuition told me otherwise. Would I take the Dutch girl by the shoulders and tell her the obvious or let her figure it out on her own? A couple of businessmen, leaving the café, held the door open for us. They adjusted their coats and watched us walk into the heat of the room.

‘Fiona!’ Angel took both my hands. ‘Vuelve.’

I told him we had come to see the tango show. He placed a notepad in his shirt pocket then kissed our cheeks, beckoning us in.

‘Qué bueno!’ he repeated as he led us to the back room and into *Alfonsina’s Salon*. It was full of serious South Americans sipping wine and beer. Angel led us through the crowd, over the marble tiles, behind bowls of steaming soup and before plates of layered cake to a small table just left of the stage. He refused a tip for his kindness, repeating his promise of Saturdays being the best night for tango.

Wooden walls made the room cosy, intimate and warm. Tassel shades covered plum bulbs that dimmed down to a soft hue, allowing ample space for the wash of

spotlight. Conversation evaporated, knives skidded across china and glasses rested on tabletops as three bald musicians made their way to the stage. The bassist and accordion player took their seats first, adjusting sheet music and positions until the pianist appeared. Immediately sound filled the room like weather. The men played until they were sweating, until all resonance shifted from three instruments to one; locking, weaving, riding upon waves so infectious, every single body in the room moved to them. And when it came to a song they were less familiar with, they put on their reading glasses, got out the sheet music, then played on.

A pair of singers in shiny shoes appeared. Tango dancers followed, clinging and swirling with each other in perfect time, staccato against the beating rhythm. As they circled the stage, dipping and clinging, thighs around thighs, hands firmly pressed against spines, it did not surprise me that tango had started in the brothels of La Boca to entice and excite clientele. The lust, emotion and raw sexuality of the dance are something I have never witnessed on the stage.

I ordered three beers and when the waitress returned, she told me the gentlemen at the far table wanted to buy mine for me.

‘An invitation,’ she repeated their message with sympathetic eyes. I looked to the Dutch girl. She shrugged, picked up her bottle and poured it sideways into a frosted glass.

‘Gracias, pero no. Quisiera pagar por la cerveza.’ I told the waitress. She nodded, telling me she understood – ‘completamente’.

Both gentlemen looked disappointed but not discouraged and when they began to approach our table, I slid down in my chair, took a big gulp of beer from the bottle and

looked away. The less encouragement I gave them, the less trouble I would have – at least, that was the plan.

The younger man's mouth shone like a mirror. We were blinded by it as they strutted towards us; heads tilted slightly, fingers fiddling fat cigars.

'Buenas noches.' The younger man wore braces on his teeth. The situation was beginning to make more sense. He told me they were shrimp exporters from Mexico City in town for a fish convention. I took another swig of my beer.

'Are you taken?' The older one asked.

'Excuse me?' I couldn't help but question.

'You, with the pelo moreno – are you taken?' They were not wasting any time. The older man took a seat. It nearly snapped beneath his weight. He sat directly across from me, twisting the gold ring on his little finger. *Did I look like a prostitute?* Infuriated by his arrogant advances, I downed the last of my beer then turned to answer. However, now he looked like the Godfather and I began to realise that perhaps he was not in town for a fish convention after all. That it would probably be in my best interest not to insult him, so I told him I was married.

'My husband is in Scotland,' I said with a great amount of confidence.

'Good, then he won't know what you get up to! Come join us for a drink.' The older man puffed on his cigar, looked to his friend and waited for my response. Smoke rings rose to the ceiling. He patted his belly that looked ready to burst. I had finally had enough and was about to tell both of them exactly what I thought when the Dutch girl's boyfriend stepped in.

‘She’s with me.’ He put his arm around my shoulder, muscles bulging, teeth sparkling. I looked to him, he looked to me, then we both looked to the men – their eyes very wide.

‘What about la rubia? Is she with you?’ They were suspicious but at the same time, intrigued.

‘They’re both with me. *Lo siento.*’ Apparently, Peruvians are the ones who do it best.

The two men returned to their table, lost in the images their minds had created. We ordered three more beers and as the lights went down for a final tango, I heard the voice of Alfonsina. *My greatest failure has been not to be able to convince those around me that, since I have a masculine brain, I have the right to live my life with the independence, the dignity, and the decorum with which any normal man can live his.*⁶⁴

Chapter Twenty-Two

Virgin

The day will come when women will dare to reveal how they really feel. That day our values will be turned upside down, and fashions will surely change.

– Alfonsina Storni

The Latin American Women Writers Conference begins today. I reserved a place, paid the registration fee but nerves consume me. After all my time spent at University, it is hard to believe that I have never actually been to an academic conference. I imagine a room full of women in thick glasses and men in spinach-green bow ties, all with briefcases and quick demanding steps. Thinking of this, I dressed Argentinean for the occasion; in black with red boots. I brushed my hair back into a ponytail and put on the last of my lipstick, making a mental note to buy more. Ready to go with a backpack full of paper, pens and business cards, I took my conference ticket in one hand, programme in the other then hailed a rusty old bus from Retiro Station to the Museo Malba.

The conference was supposed to start at 9a.m. For some reason I thought the conference, being a public event, would start on time. But like all things Argentinean, the conference began an hour after it was scheduled to. Wandering around the second floor of the gallery I felt the air conditioned chill seep deep into my skin. Sketches by Norah Borges were tucked inside a shrunken three-walled room within a room. Their size and pastel simplicity beckoned me over.

Expectations are normally dangerous and more often than not, completely wrong. When the conference began, I realised how wrong mine were. If I did not know better, I

would have thought I had entered a fashion show instead of an academic conference.

Wella Shampoo sponsored the event, setting up tables beside bookstalls with free aromatic samples. Few women, if any, wore glasses but their eyes were carefully traced in both pencil and shadow. There was only a handful of men, the dark handsome type, and all lacked bow ties.

I took a seat towards the back of the auditorium, close to the exit, just in case I felt the sudden urge to flee. In my excitement, I had told Ana about the event with the hope that she would join me. A reciprocal invitation for all the ones I had received from her. Chances were she would have other plans but I asked nonetheless.

Bodies trickled in until the auditorium hummed with voices. Four speakers took to the stage; shuffling papers, adjusting blouses, their high heels knocking against the hardwood floor. Scanning the seats, I wondered where Lea was and looked for a casually dressed Texan with fair hair and blue eyes. From her own self-description, in this crowd, she would be easy to find.

The first topic under discussion was why Argentinean women write in languages other than Spanish. Victoria certainly fell into this category, impressing Mussolini with her impeccable Italian, sending letters to Virginia Woolf in English, writing most of her work in what was her first language, French. *What I am most interested in saying must be said here in my country and in a language familiar to all. What I write in French is not French in a certain sense, in terms of its spirit.*⁶⁵ The speakers eventually concluded that the reason for this verbal collaboration filters down to Argentina being not just a South American country but also a European country. Because most Argentine writers have some sort of European blood in them, they feel just as close to Europe as to Argentina

and this is why many write in their forefather/mother's language. Primarily this has to do with class. Opportunity comes from language. Class is established through language. Communication is language. If writers write to communicate, then does it not make the most sense to communicate in as many languages as possible? Translation can only relay so much. Through translation, the original form of a text changes. The voice changes too. Translators give their own emphasis to aspects they feel most relevant. Translators are writers in their own right, so if a writer is able to write in a variety of languages, then he or she has the ability to communicate directly with an international audience.

The floor opened up to questions. A woman sitting near the front was the first to raise her hand. Her long ginger hair, ankle-length skirt, soft floral top and well-worn Birkenstocks contrasted with the glamour in the room. When she spoke, a distinctive Texan drawl (which I had failed to previously hear over the telephone – perhaps my ear for Spanish was improving?) underlined each of her words announcing, unmistakably, that this was Lea Fletcher.

When the session ended, I introduced myself. She did look like the Good Witch of the West, minus the crown and wand of course.

Lea was surrounded by a band of curious delegates. I thought back to the bookshop on 333 Suipacha and the woman with all the cigarettes. 'Lea is highly respected in the literary community,' she had said and this certainly seemed to be the case. When the bodies lessened, I finally managed to get Lea's attention. Traditional kisses were immediately exchanged. She brought up Carlos Andreola in a rolling drawl that spread soft as butter. 'I don't know what you said or did but he couldn't say enough

nice things about you. He's definitely a fan of yours.' I blushed. 'He said you'd really done your homework, honey.'

Lea asked if I had made any contacts at the conference so far. I shook my head. Lea took me by the hand. 'You'll need to talk to the lady over there.' She motioned with her chin. In the far corner of the reception, beside the Wella Shampoo stand, there was a very tall woman with a gap between her two front teeth. Lea waved and she returned the wave warmly. 'That's Norma Alloatti. She lives in Rosario and is gold. I'll introduce you.'

After exchanging details with Norma, who encouraged me to contact her whenever I found myself in Rosario, Lea vanished and I went to the restroom only to wait patiently in a long but fashionable queue. A row of middle aged women rummaged through their make-up bags. Raspberry lipstick, blush and nail polish were applied then reapplied. The clock ticked over and I was ready to burst but the queue stood stagnant. Hairspray gasped from aerosol tins and as I proceeded to get light-headed from all of the fumes, various eyeliners and mascaras rolled onto the floor. I bent over to return them to their rightful owners who painted and puckered with egocentric delight. Once the room emptied, I realised that the queue was not for the toilets but the mirrors.

Poetry is like food to me. I need it. I love it. And because of this, I was determined to sit in on at least one poetry session. The programme gave a room number, time and selection of poets. When I found the room, several of the women I had watched applying make-up in the bathroom now sat around a small oval shaped table, flipping through the crisp, clean pages of their own private poetry collections. Watches were

checked and when the first speaker rose to begin, Ana appeared in the doorway. She hurried in, squeezed my arm then took the chair beside me.

‘You made it!’ I was delighted.

Ana kissed my cheeks. ‘Claro Fionita. Like you, I also live for poetry.’

The session was different from any poetry reading I have ever been to. The poems were short, no more than five lines each and I could not figure out if this style was particular to the women in the room or contemporary porteño poets in general. (I would eventually find it to be the former.) Each turned pages like orchestra conductors then, as if reading in Hebrew, repeated the poems, only in a reversed order. Most, if not all of the poems, had to do with the poets’ mothers. In unison, the audience bent their heads forward and listened with deep contemplation. Were they praying? Several black tears fell to the formica table. Their faces were sliding away but they did not seem to mind because something raw and rooted tied these women together. It was more than make-up. More than poetry. Perhaps it was something as obvious as womanhood? Again, the poems were repeated; front to back then back to front and as much as I enjoyed listening, by the fifth reading of ‘Mi Madre es como...’ I was ready to wax off my eyebrows – for pleasure. Ana rolled her eyes. Apparently, I was not alone in my boredom. When the poets started embracing, we snuck out of the side door to catch the end of the political discussion in the main auditorium.

‘Where are all our students?’ A woman spoke into the end of a suspended microphone.

‘It’s too expensive to buy books, let alone pay for a ticket to this conference,’ another woman, dressed in Prada, cried out.

Boldly, a younger woman stood up. She straightened her jacket as she waited for the microphone to find her. 'Why should we study writers and artists from Europe and North America when there are plenty of writers and artists in Argentina! The rest of the world knows little of our culture, of our writers. Our voices should be heard!'

The room erupted and few remained in their seats. 'It's the Argentine economy,' a white haired woman interrupted. 'Not only does it affect our society, it affects the arts too.' Her voice trembled but she persevered until everyone was standing again.

'The government and churches are corrupt!' A woman in sunglasses leaned over the white haired women's shoulder. Each and every delegate was angry, frustrated and ready for a fight. *Swing open the doors*, I wanted to yell. *Let's take this into the streets*. It was difficult not to sympathise with their frustrations. The delegates had the energy of a protest, that feeling of strength and power through numbers. The discussion – by this point, a heated debate – seduced me. I wanted to experience more of this side of Argentine life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Second-hand

My only ambition is to some day manage to write, more or less well, more or less badly, but as a woman. If I had a marvellous lamp like Aladdin's and by rubbing it I was able to write like a Shakespeare, a Dante, a Goethe, a Cervantes, or a Dostoyevsky, it occurs to me that I would throw away the lamp. Because I think that a woman cannot express her feelings and thoughts the way a man would, no more than she can speak with a man's voice.

– Victoria Ocampo

There is a great second-hand bookshop in San Francisco called *The Green Apple*, on Clement Street, sandwiched between Chinese stalls laden with massive grapefruits and strange vegetables that resemble dried eels. My Dad used to take me there when I was a little girl and every time I am home, we go back to its towering stacks to see what kind of discarded treasure might be waiting for us.

Aside from being cheaper, second-hand bookshops are also magical. My collection of second-hand books have come with all sorts of extras; ticket stubs from Belgian trains, receipts from music shops, phone numbers smeared on the backs of bar napkins, matchbooks from Brazilian hotels. It gets the mind wandering. Not only do you get a book from a second-hand bookshop, you get a story within the story.

In Buenos Aires, Avenida Corrientes (according to Eduardo Paz Leston) is the street for second-hand bookshops. Aside from the obvious, I thought it might bring back memories of *The Green Apple*, a faint feeling of home. Practically speaking, I was looking for Ocampo's six *Autobiografías* and Carlos Andreola's biography of *Alfonsina*. Because both had been out of print for decades, I knew this would not be easy.

Corrientes was crowded in bodies, stalls and light. The sun burned everything it touched; even the random patches of shade offered little comfort. Beneath my feet, the crumbling pavement turned back into the dust it came from. Dozens of people forced flyers for pizza restaurants into my hands. The wind blew hot against my face and as I watched a group of deaf school children sign to each other from the opposite side of the street, I felt like the deaf one. Through their hands they spoke of stories; they gossiped and joked. The lack of sound and understanding on my side made me realise how powerful their form of communication really is.

In the first second-hand bookshop a man with thick hair, broad shoulders and small rectangular glasses greeted me at the door. I asked him about Ocampo's *Autobiografias*. Did he have anything written by Carlos Andreola? He shook his head but I still had questions. Reaching into my bag, I searched for my wallet. In it, I had a list of other texts. Where might I find them? I would entreat his suggestions then be on my way. Only my wallet was not where I had left it. My heart pounded against my eardrums. *Where was it? Shit!* My mind raced. My blood pumped loudly against my eardrums. 'My wallet...' I gasped.

'*They've* taken it?' The man looked just as worried as me.

I collapsed to the floor and tore my bag apart. Pens rolled across the carpet. Customers stared at me. I flicked scraps of paper, old chewing gum packets, three empty water bottles over my shoulders.

'It's gone.' I wanted to cry, scream, kick myself for being so stupid. How did this happen? I was so careful. With my face in my hands, all thoughts left me.

‘Look again.’ The man pleaded. ‘Don’t give up. You have so many pockets in that bag. Maybe you changed pockets and cannot remember?’ He took off his glasses and sat beside me on the floor. We looked through each and every inch, finally finding my wallet in the one pocket I had forgotten to search. I felt like an idiot.

The man smiled, replaced his glasses and rubbed his palms together. He reached for my scrap of paper.

‘Now, how can I help you?’

He took me by the hand and lifted me up off the floor. ‘I am glad they did not steal your wallet señorita,’ his sharp brown eyes shimmered. I had forgotten about the heat. Somehow this situation cooled me. ‘But I am afraid the books you are looking for are rare, too rare for this shop.’ Shaking his head, he kept his eyes on mine. ‘But good luck and be careful.’

Defeated, I now felt on a mission and walked to the corner of Lavalle and Azcuénaga, overly aware of both my body and possessions. Every inch of me was drenched in sweat. To my left, an indigenous woman cooked sugared almonds in a copper dish. She shook them from side to side and once they had toasted, siphoned them into a small brown paper bag. ‘Un peso,’ she called out to the tide of bodies. In their rush, her words slipped to a whisper.

The area I had wandered into was far different from the centre of the city. It was more suburban, working class, local. School children, labourers, old men and pregnant women combed the streets for sweets, cafés, bars and their weekly shopping. I looked to my scribbled directions. There was a four-storey building where the second bookshop on my list should have stood; a massive concrete block decorated in small grey stones. Satin

and taffeta wedding dresses filled the windows. Awkwardly positioned mannequins in veils and tiaras beckoned teenage girls. Sipping coke, they stared at the lace and sequins, dreaming of their future big day.

A man stood on the corner peeling an orange. I asked him if the wedding dress shop had ever been a bookshop. He looked at me as if I was mad, shook his head then told me if I walked two blocks down and four blocks over, he pointed with a long strand of unbroken peel, that I would find a bookshop. Separating the orange into two segments he bit into one, promising the walk was not far.

Drifting through tangled intersections, past busy garages, grassy islands full of dogs and tattered awnings, I was far away from the Buenos Aires I knew. There were no tourists with guidebooks, no porteños in suits, no poodles on gold leashes. By chance I had stumbled into a working class neighbourhood and immediately felt an enormous sense of relief. Needing a drink, I found a café with large open windows. I rested and watched a van pull up to the kerb. Four large men unloaded carpets. Beside me lovers kissed. Three uniformed boys with comic books meandered home from school. I read for a little while, paid for my drink then pressed on. The man with the orange had stretched the truth, it took ages for me to find this bookshop.

From the outside, the shop looked more like a betting shop than anything else. A long counter stretched in a U shape from one end of the shore to the other. Chicken wire hung from ceiling to floor. Where was the livestock? Where were the books? An old fashioned bell hung from the wire. Cautiously, I rang it. An older couple in tan smocks stuck their heads out from the back room; his above hers. They motioned for me to wait with two pairs of enormous hands. When they approached, they smelled of ether.

‘Do you sell books?’ I asked through the wire, still wondering why it was there. Angry and annoyed, they told me they only sold pamphlets for school children. ‘Los niños,’ the woman repeated with large black teeth hanging over her bottom lip. The man lifted a dirty glass to his mouth. He swallowed then belched. My hopes of finding a second-hand bookshop for the day vanished immediately.

Hailing a taxi, I told the driver to take me to the Congreso Library. Great cloaks of smog from rush hour traffic settled in and around all buildings. I took small breaths to avoid the fumes but it was too hot to breathe softly, too hot to keep the windows rolled up.

The radio blasted a series of pop songs that all sounded the same. I took a deep breath. The driver reached for the radio switch, asking if I was from Mexico. Surprised, I shook my head.

‘I live in Scotland.’

He told me *Braveheart* was his favourite film. That he had seen it fifteen times. He wanted to know if it was a true story.

‘Is it true? Ah, well – William Wallace did exist but...’

‘He look like Mel Gibson – yes?’

I could see breaking the illusion between *Braveheart* the film and *Braveheart* the reality was pointless. I replied diplomatically.

‘There is a statue of William Wallace in Stirling that looks exactly like Mel Gibson.’

‘And what else?’

He was inquisitive, wanting to know as much as he could about Scotland, so for half an hour we sat on the cool steps of the Congreso Library until he felt satisfied. He then gave me my ride for free.

The windows to the library were blackened; harsh lights and thoughtful bums filled its slender entranceway. Determined, I walked carefully through both and attempted to enter, but was immediately turned away. A guard (who by this time I felt ready to take on) with a pinky ring and cold hard eyes told me I could not go in without a passport. He stood in my path and it was obvious no amount of sweetness on my part would move him. Because I had been through all of this before at the National Library I should have known the passport thing a common custom, I should not have been so surprised, but after the eventful day I had spent, I was angry and stormed off with the temper of a true Argentinean.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Son

*From here, I could throw my heart
over a rooftop.
My heart would roll away
without anyone seeing it.*

*I could shout
my pain
till my body breaks in two:
my pain would be dissolved
by the waters of the river.*

– Alfonsina Storni, from 'Loneliness'

If I did not speed things up, I would never make it to Chile. My time in Buenos Aires was quickly running out but before I left, I still had a few things to do. At the top of my list was the Alfonsina Library and with a quick scan of my map, I headed for Venezuela Street; a place lost in time, bordering several sharp edges. People searched through garbage, mangy dogs roamed in packs and the dirt from the dilapidated buildings left a hard stale film on every possible surface.

The Library was tiny, a late sixties structure made of bricks and chipped plaster. Rusting bars encased the windows on ground level, banners reading Biblioteca Martín del Barco Centenera hung perpendicular to two large wooden doors. A small plaque and emblem stared down onto the street, the latter indigenous in artwork, the former painted blue and gold. I pushed open the doors, immediately eclipsed by a cool white interior.

A guard sat reading behind a small desk. I asked him if this was Alfonsina's Library. He summoned me over, waving a pen and told me to sign myself in. There was a

clipboard and an empty sheet of paper. He failed to ask for my passport (something I now kept on me at all times – just in case), pointed to the staircase then returned to his book.

Proceeding upstairs, I entered a room outlined in tall shelves. Potted plants sprung up from each corner. Light filtered in through the long windows creating soft pools and square shadows across the floor.

‘Can I help you?’ A woman in thick glasses approached me. I told her I was looking for books on Alfonsina.

‘You’re timing is impeccable!’ she exclaimed, grabbing me by the shoulders. She told me her name was Norma then asked me if I knew. I admitted I did not. Surprised, she looked over the rim of her glasses.

‘No sé.’ I repeated, intrigued by what I was about to learn.

She stared at me as if I was clairvoyant. The sunlight crossed my face. Blinded, I turned away. She kept a hold of my shoulders and told me I was very lucky, that Alejandro Storni was scheduled to give a talk at the library in half an hour. If I wanted to wait and read, then I was welcome to do so. She busied herself with helping me find books and articles on Alfonsina. Norma was very kind. Stunned by my stroke of luck, I wondered if Alfonsina was also leading me by the wrist.

A score of bodies filtered into the library and when Alejandro entered the room, he recognised me immediately. ‘How is your family in Scotland?’ Hardly able to contain his excitement, he looked out to the crowd already in their seats. ‘This girl has come all the way from Scotland. She is studying Alfonsina. Can you believe it? They know of Alfonsina in Scotland!’ His Spanish was delicate but alive.

He remained standing, perched his cane on the nearest chair, polished then adjusted his glasses. The afternoon light faded behind him and after dusting off the sleeves on his navy suit, he began to speak. What struck me initially was how he referred to his mother as 'Alfonsina' and not 'my mother'. It took a while for me to understand him. His voice was so soft, his words almost knitted together. He mentioned Delmira Agustini, the Uruguayan poet and Alfonsina's sonnet of her. He spoke of Gabriela Mistral, how she had visited their home when he was young. Because of his mother, he had met many famous people during his lifetime. Once, in the middle of the street, Alfonsina introduced him to the President of the Republic of Argentina.

Of his mother's character he said she was quiet because of her pain, that she was sad and worked constantly. As for her reading, she was distinct, choosy and would read for students but would often refuse to read for their parents. Her voice was raspy. Throughout her life she could not stop teaching and loved to make people laugh.

Previously, at the theatre, I had failed to notice the intensity of Alejandro's eyes but this time, they shone bright as topaz. And for a man of ninety, he had the enthusiasm of someone half his age. Every quarter hour, he reached into his back pocket and took out a handkerchief. The excitement and attention made him perspire. After patting his brow, his thoughts refocused and he continued with his tales.

Women made up a majority of the audience. They were various ages and from all sides of the city. One woman asked him if people were cruel to him when he was a child because of his 'untraditional upbringing', meaning he was the illegitimate son of a young independent woman. He told her 'no', that Alfonsina was very protective of him. He gave the example of when the press tried questioning him on the subject of his father.

Immediately Alfonsina intervened insisting they leave him alone. Once Alfonsina made the truth public, no one bothered them. In regards to his father, Alejandro said he had met him and that he was a wonderful man. Because Alfonsina never said a bad thing about him, he had no reason to feel animosity towards him. As Alejandro saw things, he was fortunate to have been born from such a loving union and magnificent woman.

The relationship Alejandro shared with his mother was unorthodox for the time. They were the best of friends. She depended on the closeness of their relationship throughout her adult life and because of this, he was extremely attentive towards her. When he was a young teenager, she asked him if he smoked (Alfonsina rarely smoked). Alejandro told her he did and when she inquired about the brand, she insisted his choice was not good enough. 'Tomorrow we're going to buy you a good pack of cigarettes,' she promised. And the next day, they went to a café and smoked the entire pack together. But Alejandro has since stopped smoking. He was seventy-one when he gave the habit up.

'My doctor made me.' Alejandro smiled, removing his handkerchief from his back pocket.

'Money doesn't serve any purpose,' Alejandro spoke like a prophet. He liberally jumped from one topic to the next.

Alfonsina never married because, apparently, Alejandro did not like any of her suitors. Alejandro, always her faithful companion, was twenty-six when she killed herself in Mar del Plata. 'Cancer attacked her mind and her body,' his voice grew heavy. She would never talk about her cancer with anyone and pushed many of her friends away because of her disease.

After two hours of speaking, Alejandro grew tired and although he had more stories to tell, felt he had shared enough for the evening. It was getting late. A full moon was stuck midway in the night sky and once the applause died down, he approached me, kissed my cheeks, took my hand in his and patted it gently. Alejandro made his way out and I gathered my things together, wondering if I would cross paths with him again.

‘Buenas noches,’ a small round woman stood before me. She spoke of a contact at St. Andrew’s University, trying desperately to connect, then offered to walk with me to Avienda del Mayo. ‘It’s not safe to walk alone,’ she reminded me of the dangers of dark side streets. Of course I did not know her but figured if she was interested in Alfonsina, then she was probably alright.

Because of the speed of her chatter, I never caught her name but maybe I was not supposed to. What was interesting though, was her interpretation of Argentine writers and their affiliation with class. She informed me how the middle and lower classes do not like Victoria Ocampo because they do not respect her.

‘Her money made her famous, not her writing,’ the woman asserted. ‘Unlike Victoria, Alfonsina still has a small, faithful following, a library named after her (the only library in all of Argentina dedicated to a woman) and a monument in Mar del Plata because she really did fight for her writing. She fought for life! My class not only respects Alfonsina, they love her.’

Chapter Twenty-Five

Faith

'The day will come when women will dare to reveal how they really feel. That day our values will be turned upside down, and fashions will surely change.'

– *Alfonsina Storni*

Through a further (and final) of Lea Fletcher's contacts, I rang and arranged to meet Graciela Queirolo, teacher and co-editor of the book *Nosotras...y la piel: Selección de ensayos de Alfonsina Storni*. Over the phone she sounded mature, sophisticated – a typical porteño – and because we decided to converge at 2p.m., I had the morning to visit the site where Alfonsina was transported immediately after her suicide. From Mar del Plata, her body was brought to Constitution Station (an old, massive, dilapidated train depot) where members of the local Women's Club transferred her to their building on 924 Maipú. Not long after, Alfonsina was buried in Chacarita Cemetery. I do not know why I felt the need to find the Women's Club but something made me choose between finding it and the Chararita Cemetery. (Time was precious and I could not visit both.) Perhaps my decision had to do with the impact Alfonsina had on women? Perhaps it had to do with meaning? Symbolism? Faith? At the time of Alfonsina's death in 1938, Women's Clubs were rare and of great significance. Perhaps it was simple curiosity?

Turning the corner of Maipú, I walked down a slim street abuzz with alarms and criss-crossing telephone wires. Taxis beeped me out of their way, porteños zipped up towards San Martín subway station. When I found number 924, I sat on the cold cement front steps. It was no longer a Women's Club but a car rental shop.

* * *

Graciela and I met at Café Tortoni, which was quickly becoming my regular hangout. In order to recognise her, she would wear a red scarf and in order for her to recognise me, I would wear a green one.

I arrived first, still shaken up by the loss of the Women's Club until Angel greeted me with wide open arms. He led me to my favourite table beside the bar. I gazed dreamily at the Tiffany lamps and marble pillars. Angel brought me a strong cappuccino then asked me if I had actually decided to stay in Argentina.

'That would be nice, Angel.' He put the pads of his fingers on my table arching his hand upwards. His eyes looked deep into mine. They were tired. 'Only I have to go. I must travel to Rosario, then Uruguay and Chile.'

'Señorita, I speak for my country when I say we are sorry to lose you. You must promise to come back and visit us.' I promised but wondered, in the back of my mind, when that time would be.

Graciela soon appeared in her red scarf. She was much younger than I expected. Was she my age? Was she younger than me? Maybe it was the braces that made her look so youthful. She was easy to speak with, friendly and approachable. After ten minutes, we were chatting like we had known each other forever. When I suggested Alejandro Storni's stories were a little difficult to decipher, she nodded in agreement.

'Few people understand Alejandro. In fact many fall asleep when he speaks because he has a tendency to ramble.' She gave me her book as a gift, lifted her latte and insisted I contact her colleague, Alicia Salomone, when I arrived in Chile. 'The trouble with Alejandro,' she continued her previous thought, 'is that he is trying to make his mother into a perfect person. He glamorises her image because he wants to preserve

Alfonsina's portrait – a portrait that he has painted, a portrait that is not entirely true.'

Graciela's comments were something to think about and she reminded me that the truth often comes in a variety of shades; depending on the victor, the survivor or the one with the biggest stick. I had to filter out what made the most sense then put those pieces together.

We finished our coffees and she asked if we could meet again. Without much thought or protest, I agreed, realising I would have to postpone my departure date for at least another few days and that, to my delight, I would probably never leave Buenos Aires.

After my meeting with Graciela, I visited Monica Ottino for the last time. Over the past few weeks, I had grown very close to her. Like a mother, she had looked after me and I wanted to give her a gift. On my way to her office, I went to a confectionery boutique with jewel coloured sweets from ceiling to floor. Everything smelled of sugar, chocolate and caramel. I chose a variety of soft filled truffles and had the box wrapped in gold paper. When I arrived at her office she kissed my cheeks, welcomed me in then ordered two coffees from the front desk. The last thing I needed was more coffee but with my addiction rekindled, I could not say no.

As always, Victoria was the centre of our conversation. We spoke about her lack of modesty and love of acting. *I have an incurable disease, and it can't be attributed to any external cause: an absolute desperation. I'm young, people admire me, men fall in love with me, I'm intelligent, healthy, and full of life. I live in the lap of luxury, I can aspire to almost anything, my strong will makes all things possible (except freedom...I want to dedicate myself to the theatre) and in spite of all this, I am filled with a deep*

*inner despair.*⁶⁶ Monica told me that the French actress, Marguerite Moreno, gave Victoria lessons and that she grew shy when she had to speak in front of an audience (something I found a little hard to believe).

‘Victoria never went alone to any function but with a vast array of friends because she enjoyed making a grand entrance,’ Monica raised her eyes to meet mine. ‘Victoria was all about entrances.’

Monica brought up Graham Greene. When he visited Victoria in Mar del Plata, Victoria would take his arm and lead him through the grounds. I thought about Greene’s novel based in Argentina, *The Honorary Consul*, and whether Victoria influenced his characters in any way. She had translated much of Greene’s work in *Sur* and was deeply affected by the fiercely private, handsome Englishman, but how had she marked him? Monica told me, contrary to the stranger’s opinions after Alejandro’s lecture but in tune with Victoria’s own testimonies, that she did not want people to think she was a highbrow writer who wrote occasionally but someone who was hard working and talented. *From the moment we begin to write, we are condemned to not being able to talk about anything but ourselves, about what we have seen with our eyes, felt with our sensitivity, understood with our intelligence.*⁶⁷

I was intrigued, as well as bewildered, by the porteño necessity for ‘the maid’ and asked Monica to elaborate. She began with Borges.

‘Borges had a maid named Fanny. Victoria also had a maid named Fanny. The reason I changed Fanny’s name in *Eva y Victoria* to Pepi was because of Borges’s maid. It would have been too confusing for audiences.’ I looked up from my notes, wondering why the tradition still existed. Monica sensed her deflection from my question and

continued. 'People in Victoria's class were extremely dependent on maids.' She stirred the last of the coffee in her cup. Her wrist moved with the pace of her thoughts. It seemed to me that people in twenty-first century Argentina, even if they were not of Victoria's class, were still dependent on maids. When I asked Monica if she had a maid she replied, 'Of course and she is a very nice girl. She lives with us during the week. She is responsible for all the household chores, for cleaning my husband's office and our sons' apartments.' My question was answered as best it could be.

Our conversation ended on the issues of translation and politics. 'It's in good faith and you enter a different world through translation.' I could tell Monica was pleased to be discussing both topics with me. 'One cannot expect a text to be the same after it has been translated.' As for politics, her views left me wondering. 'In Argentina, women and politics do not work. Women go crazy once they get into power.' (But was that not the same with men?)

'Which countries will you visit after Argentina?' she asked, as I organised my bag, getting ready to go.

'Uruguay and Chile.' I hugged her then kissed her cheeks.

'Too bad Argentina has not learned from Chile.' Monica held me tight. 'Chile recovered after their dictatorship but not Argentina. Even though we fought for independence together, Argentina and Chile are two very different countries. You will understand when you get there.'

Curious about their differences, I thanked her for everything, then gave her the box of truffles (a meagre gift for all she had given me). Her last words followed me down

the shaft of the rickety elevator and when I slid open the series of doors at the bottom, they had lodged themselves inside my memory.

‘Go and write a good book, Fiona. I have great faith in you.’ She had said, pen in hand, eyes wet. I could never forget Monica – her intelligence, kindness, grace. In my mind, she defined the true porteña.

* * *

Eduardo Paz Leston (or Teddy Paz as he was known to his friends) told me to meet him. He was impressed that I had met China Zorrilla and offered to show me the house Victoria had shared with Julian in Palermo.

The interview did not begin well. This second time around, he was patronising and irritated. Each question I asked was cut off by sharp, somewhat aggressive language. When I asked him about his own impressions of Victoria he snapped in Spanish, ‘This question you ask me is not important.’ Startled, I racked my brain trying to think of something that might inspire serenity. We walked in silence until we arrived at his apartment building.

‘This is where I live – do you remember?’

Of course I did. I had been there before, even if it was only on the outside. He put his key in the massive door and pushed.

When we entered his flat, it felt as if we were in some sort of veiled chamber. I sensed his uneasiness and could not understand why until I saw various photographs of James Dean and a very young Elvis. Instead of focusing on the photographs, I looked at his books. There were thousands of them, so many the walls were entirely hidden from view.

‘You have quite a collection,’ I said, trying to establish peace.

He nodded and insisted I take a seat but before I did, I reached into my bag and took out a bottle of Malbec wine. ‘This is to thank you for your time.’ I held out the bottle as an offering. His face lit up and he called to someone in the kitchen. A Peruvian maid stuck her head out from behind the door. She approached me, took the bottle from my hands then retreated backwards to the kitchen.

Eduardo’s stories about Victoria were few and forced, but he shared them with me nonetheless. He told me that he had met Victoria a few times; that she loved chicken salad and tomatoes; that her favourite dessert was fresh fruit. And when she dined with him, he had mistakenly served compote, so she stuck an apple on the end of a knife and told him she would eat the apple instead. I laughed but Eduardo did not find the story amusing. He told me it was not a strange coincidence that the year (1931) Victoria had decided to start *Sur* was the year her father died.

‘Speaking of the theatre, what do you think about Monica Ottino’s play, *Eva y Victoria*?’

He shook his head. ‘It is very biased. Victoria is portrayed as a cold, hard woman. Eva is portrayed as the victim and that is not how it was in reality. Victoria was a victim of Peronism you know.’

I asked him what happened the last time he saw Victoria.

‘It was in 1970 and I met her on the street. She proclaimed, “Viva Coca Cola es viva la basura” (Long live Coca Cola means long live rubbish).’

He insisted I read Ketaki Kushari Dyson’s book *In Your Blossoming Flower-Garden* about Victoria’s relationship with Rabindranath Tagore. *God of Tagore, said I to*

*myself, you who do not want to shelter me from anything and do not mind the oblivion in which I hold you, how well you know me! Hidden God who knows that I shall always seek him! Merciful God who knows that the only path to him is the path of freedom!*⁶⁸ Victoria adored Tagore with whom she felt a tremendous spiritual bond. He gave her clarity of mind, soul and vision. She read all of his poetry and even wrote an article reviewing his work for *La Nación*.

I could hear the maid rattling dishes in the kitchen. A kettle howled and within minutes she appeared with a tray, tea and an assortment of biscuits. She left the tray on a small wooden table in the centre of the room. The afternoon was waning and we decided, before it got too late, to visit Victoria's house.

As we strolled, Eduardo pointed to the ornamented buildings with long windows and painted shutters. 'My uncle lived there,' he motioned enthusiastically to a lovely apartment lifted high from the street, 'and this is where my grandmother lived.'

When we arrived in front of Victoria's house, serenity radiated from every leaf, tile, curb and corner. Blooming jacaranda trees protected the neighbourhood from the pace of the city that immediately felt very far away. The streets were so quiet and the sticky aroma of jasmine hung in the air. Eduardo reminded me that very few of the buildings in the area were occupied.

'Most people have gone to their country clubs for the weekend.'

It was that kind of neighbourhood. But I could hardly hear him, my eyes transfixed on the architecture before me; cube shaped and tucked away, Victoria's milk-white love nest was unique in comparison to its neighbours. In order to build the house, she had to truly exercise her determination. Several architects rejected her proposal

because they thought her idea unattractive, embarrassing or totally unacceptable for the area. Never one to give in to pressure or fashion trends, Victoria persisted and finally found a rebellious architect who agreed to follow her futuristic building plans.

‘This area was a well-known rendezvous. People used to meet here and make love.’ I looked around wondering where these couples made love – in the bushes? Brick-red stones, similar to those beneath the Torre del los Ingleses Monument, lay all over the plaza. New grass was beginning to sprout and dozens of men played football.

Eduardo stood next to me with his hands in his pockets. ‘You see that park,’ he motioned with his chin. ‘There used to be nothing there.’

A purple hibiscus bush shook in the afternoon breeze. Victoria’s old home was obviously deserted. I wondered who it belonged to. Eduardo did not know but told me that most of the buildings in the area were embassies. I looked back to the house. The paint was not chipped, the windows were not broken. The garden was wild; platano and palm leaves hid most of it from view. In our moment of silence the unspoken strangeness between Eduardo and I lifted.

He felt it too and immediately offered to take me to the Museo del Instituto Nacional Sanmartiniano, so we walked along the smooth twisting pavement, sheltered by shadows cast from the endless rows of palatial homes.

Vines draped from the museum’s entrance. We pushed them aside, cutting our fingers on their thorns. The museum was an old house with tall ceilings, wooden beams, a fireplace and a few landscape paintings. No one else was there except a security guard. The place felt eerie; the soles of our shoes echoed loudly against the floor.

We did not stay long. It was getting late and I wanted to leave things on a positive note. Eduardo walked me to the bus stop, telling me more about his family life. The street was busy; rush hour had set in, and I watched the cars race by. When my bus approached, Eduardo was still talking and, in his excitement, pushed me right in front of it. The bus slammed on its brakes; the smell of burnt rubber lifted and Eduardo, it appeared, failed to notice he had done anything wrong.

‘RUN!’ he shouted enthusiastically over the roar of the traffic. Waving to him from the safety of my seat, I watched his stout silhouette fade into the distance.

* * *

I needed to be alone (an impossibility when travelling – especially in hostels – but I had to try) and went to the market for a few things: avocados, cheese, yoghurt, bread, tomatoes, red wine and a *Buenos Aires Herald*.

My mind was overloaded with too many thoughts. I was also physically exhausted and could hardly stand. Desperate for a moment of nothingness, I tried clearing my mind. I walked through the freshness of the early evening; a sliver of a moon and few stars sparkled on the edge of the city. I forced myself to stop thinking about my afternoon with Eduardo, about Victoria, Alfonsina – about my life in Argentina. I refused to think about the past, stopped thinking about where to go next and who to speak with. Taking a deep breath, I crossed the street with a flower seller who handed me a pink carnation.

‘Para usted señorita,’ he said with great gaps in his gums, gaps nearly the same colour as the carnation.

‘Gracias señor,’ I said as I tucked the flower behind my ear.

Refreshed and composed, I carried my groceries up three flights of spiralling stairs then made my way to the hostel's cramped kitchen. There was a rusty fridge, several brown cabinets and a few tin dishes drying in a rack beside the sink. The faucet dripped and the floor groaned when you stood in one place for too long. The night's coolness crept up from the tiled courtyard and in through the dining area, partitioned off from the kitchen by an island made of raw, untreated wood. Bob Dylan's voice came through the stereo. It brought me back to Glasgow, back to R. He sang *Twist of Fate* and my heartstrings felt a few sharp tugs. I had a feeling R. might be listening to the same track. Our life together was a series of those kinds of moments; random twists of fate.

Beside the stove, I noticed a woman trying desperately to cook green curry; she was telling her boyfriend off for not helping and for drinking all of the wine she had bought for *their* dinner. He kept telling her to 'chill' – a word he repeated in a lazy stupor.

A roll of masking tape and black felt-tip marker hung from the fridge door by two separate pieces of string. I tore off a few strips of tape then wrote my initials on each strip with the marker. Labelling food is one thing that really irritates me but it must be done in a hostel or your food will not last long. This simple system, based predominantly on trust, works only part of the time.

I labelled my food then opened the fridge, shifting dozens of raw steaks and cartons of fermenting milk to make room for my cheese and yoghurt. In the process, I dropped my tomatoes and avocados, which raced each other across the sticky floor. The thought of eating something that had touched the floor made my skin crawl but I was not going to go out and buy new food – that would be ridiculous. I got down on my hands

and knees to retrieve them when the woman cooking the green curry leaned over to help me. She pulled me aside, piling the bruised fruit in my arms, to tell me that this was the beginning of her trip through South America with her new boyfriend. She looked across the kitchen to where he stood, trying to light his cigarette off the stove. She helped me wash the tomatoes in the sink and whispered, 'This was supposed to be a test, you know, before we get engaged.'

I listened, wondering if the rock solid avocado in my hands was ready to eat, then told her I thought her idea was a good one.

I asked her how old she was as I shut the refrigerator door.

'Twenty-three.'

'Twenty-three? And you're already thinking about marriage?'

'Well yeah or else – ' She suddenly seemed very young.

'What?'

'I don't know. It's just that marriage has always been my plan. I would graduate from college and get married.'

'Oh.'

She looked at me. 'Most people do that, you know!'

'Not most people I know. There's no rush. You've got plenty of time to get married.' I took a knife to a softer avocado. It was the perfect texture. The girl looked at me hopelessly. You could tell she already knew she had second thoughts about her future husband but her courage to say that outright was tucked beneath her pride.

During the course of our conversation, her boyfriend meandered over to a table full of English women. He drank their wine, laughed at their jokes, fiddled with their

hair, even asked them about their plans for the evening. It seemed his girlfriend did not exist. Was she blind? I turned to her.

‘You know, when I was twenty-three I was travelling around Australia by myself.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, because my boyfriend and I had split up.’

She looked at me, wiped her hands on the old, mangy dishtowel then threw it on the counter.

‘Thank you,’ she said, giving me a hug. ‘I have some serious thinking to do. You say it’s safe to travel on your own?’

I nodded, and with that, she removed their burnt dinner from the stove.

By now most backpackers at the Millhouse knew me. They knew I was travelling alone and because of this, felt I needed their company. I’m sure they saw me as the loner who disappeared into the cracks of the city while everyone else was still sleeping. When I had arrived at the Gardenhouse, Javier told me, almost immediately, that I was not like most travellers.

Because of this, as well as the fact that I actually enjoy solitude, I could not walk ten feet, in any direction, without someone trying to engage me in conversation. The minute I had finished making my dinner which consisted of a cheese and tomato sandwich (simple is always best), a few people I knew from the Gardenhouse showed up with their arms full of beer and plastic shopping bags full of cigarettes. They called out to me from the far side of the room, made themselves comfortable at a lopsided table then waved me over. All I wanted was to eat in peace, have a glass of wine and finish my

book but the evening's direction swerved. Instead of drinking wine, I drank a lot of beer. Instead of reading, I listened to their wild stories.

All of them were Irish and had just woken up. Views twisted and turned on the previous night's events; a party in a penthouse, how they got there they could not remember, why they were there had something to do with a strange guy in a club. I suppose this party had positive repercussions for they unanimously concluded that their excessive drug consumption would have to end, then and there. The point of reason came, for all of them, when they realised they were in an exciting foreign country with a beautiful view of Buenos Aires but that everyone around them was dancing in silence or passed out. Suddenly it all seemed very depressing. Glasses were topped up and, in unison, they chimed, 'From now on it's just booze and fags. Booze and fags.'

They repeated it like a song. 'Booze and fags.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

Buen Pastor

One could say without exaggeration that we lived in a state of perpetual violation. Everything was violated: correspondence, the law, freedom of thought, even the human person.

– Victoria Ocampo, remembering her time in Buen Pastor Prison

I took the *subté* to Constitución Station where Alfonsina's body was brought after her suicide. The station was very different from Retiro. The structure was in ruins. Great sections of it were cut off for construction that must have begun twenty years ago. Tracks had been closed. The massive arch sheltering the station was made of small squares of glass so filthy that sunlight had difficulty penetrating through. There were people sleeping everywhere: pregnant mothers and children resting on cardboard, young men with sleeping bags, begging anyone at the ticket booth for their spare change. Various old fashioned telephone booths had been sealed shut by makeshift gates and fences. Several police in bulletproof vests stood nonchalantly with loaded guns and swinging handcuffs that sparkled when they caught a rare ray of light. A broken clock watched over the station, its arms clicking over with great effort. Numerous vendors sold batteries, coke and cigarettes. In the distance a bar, with heart-shaped dulce de leche cakes and triangular sandwiches with the crust cut off, buzzed with people and flies. The barman sold burgers so rare they winked at their customers from inside the bun. Wild dogs roamed in packs, challenging the homeless for any piece of discarded food. Fluorescent lights flickered inside dark stairwells. I stood in the centre of all this, a little frightened, wondering where to go next.

First I needed to get out of the station. When I passed through the front doors, light hit me like a tidal wave. In the halo of its glow, a man sold Virgin Mary, Jesus, Bon Jovi and Che Guevara posters. I decided to ask him for directions to San Telmo. Initially, he had his back to me and when he turned around, his mouth opened to proudly show off his three yellow teeth. He told me, with flying arms, to follow Avenida Brazil, then kissed my cheek and waved to me until I was across the street and beneath the highway overpass.

Beside the set of lights, an indigenous family sold corn tortillas and freshly squeezed orange juice. They smiled at me. I walked over and bought a glass of juice. The road the poster man had told me to follow looked undesirably deserted and I wanted to make sure he had given me the correct directions. When I asked the family if I was going the right way, the father stood up.

‘You must take Defensa not Brazil – here.’ He took my empty cup, giving it to his wife. He barely reached my shoulders and began walking with me. His skin was the colour of coffee, his hair black as liquorice, his accent identical to Edith’s.

‘It is not safe for you to walk alone. I will show you the way.’ He waved goodbye to his wife and daughter.

‘Are you going to the market?’ he asked, striking a match.

‘Buen Pastor Prison.’

‘I used to know a woman who worked there.’ He lit his cigarette and when he finished it, he lit another.

When we got to the crossroads of Defensa and Humberto Primo, he threw his cigarette end to the curb. 'Argentina has abandoned my people. Do people from your country know of our difficult situation?'

I said some people knew.

'It is tragic – no?'

'Yes, it is tragic. I hope things change for your people and your country.'

'We all hope but hope is empty in a place like this.' He kissed my cheeks and lit another cigarette. 'It was nice to meet you.' And with that, he turned and walked away.

I stood there for a while, watching children play with sticks in the gutter. Several of the houses surrounding us had broken windows. Weeds sprouted from rooftops and the bases of dozens of tiny corner shops. As Andrew Graham-Yooll had once told me, this was 'the smelly side of town'.

I walked on, past antique and craft shops full of pearls and traditional wall hangings. A steeple pierced the cloudless sky. It was a beautiful day, the heat was mild, the wind cool. When I got to the tree-lined Plaza Dorrego, a street theatre group, dressed in clothes from the twenties, entertained a growing crowd. Before them, a tin can with a few coins rested on a milk crate. After a minute or so, their routine slowed down, as if it was losing all life, then froze and they became porcelain statues. Someone threw a coin in the can and they came back to life.

Because of the market as well as it being a Sunday, the streets were bustling with bodies. The market stalls around the plaza sold paintings, antique guns, silk tablecloths, old jewellery and pocket watches. Tourists with giant backpacks held fists full of money, bargaining with the stall owners for a cheaper price. A woman on stilts passed by, pulling

my hair with her long painted fingernails. To the right of me, a circle was forming around a couple dancing the tango. And in the shadows, an old woman in fishnet stockings and layers of make-up played *Redemption Song* on a comb. Across from the plaza, the restaurants were packed with more tourists drinking sangria and beer. All of them had *Lonely Planet* guidebooks resting on the corners of their tables.

Just off the plaza I noticed the sign for Buen Pastor had been changed to Museo Penitenciario Nacional and pointed to a narrow cobbled street. I followed the stones then found the entrance, nestled between a man selling belts and a woman selling maté. I walked up the steps, through an arching door and into an unpleasant and strangely foreboding atmosphere. Paint flaked off the walls. A dampness, the kind you might find in an abandoned shed, made everything smell of mildew. The only other person in the room sat behind a desk eating crustless sandwiches from a plastic box.

‘The tour guide is off sick today,’ she said in between bites. ‘You’ll have to show yourself around.’

I bought a ticket then passed into a long, narrow corridor. The echoes of my footsteps seemed to resonate off themselves. Guns, door handles, photographs and certificates sat idle in glass cases. The desk at the far end of the room was enormous, elaborately engraved and suitably distinguished. Old Argentine flags draped from several of the walls. Glass jars with various concoctions; orange and brown powders, fermenting liquids and old fashioned cork caps lined the shelves that stretched from one end of the room to the other. It looked more like a scientist’s laboratory than a warden’s office. The smell of formaldehyde drifted up through the floorboards.

I left the room and moved towards the end of the corridor, past dank cells and sticky cobwebs, until I found a set of stairs that led to a loft. In the centre of the room, there was a table with a female mannequin whose glass eyes looked directly through me. The mannequin was hooked up to an electric needle machine. Voices mumbled in indecipherable sentences in the shadows. *Was somebody there?* 'Hola?' I called out but no one responded. Across from the table and machine, more photographs clung to walls, all of them warped by water and time, so faded I could not make out what they had initially captured. A rusty set of handcuffs dangled from a nail. *Was that dried blood?* The voices in the corner grew louder. I needed to get out but the stairs back down to the corridor no longer looked sturdy. In fact, they were slowly contracting. Trapped and panicking, I closed my eyes and forced myself down, taunted by the voices until I finally reached the corridor.

At the far end of it, a giant lock sealed a gate. When I asked about seeing the rest of the prison, I was told it was impossible. 'It is off limits to members of the public,' the woman behind the desk snapped, then went back to her box of sandwiches.

Victoria must have stayed in one of the cells beyond the gate, because she shared her cell with eleven other women who before her stay in Buen Pastor, she had never had the opportunity to know.

In Buen Pastor, prisoners were forced to wear the same blue and white chequered uniforms, eat the same horrible foods and wash in cold water. Their prison environment was cramped and was not what Victoria had been used to. *Beyond the jails there was no jailkeeper, but our sleep was infested with foreboding nightmares, because life itself was a bad dream. A bad dream in which we couldn't mail a letter, however innocent it might*

*be, without fearing that it would be read. Nor could we say a word on the phone without suspecting that it was being listened to and perhaps recorded.*⁶⁹

To survive mentally, Victoria told stories and acted out plays. She entertained her fellow prisoners and through this, she learned more than she could have ever imagined. 'By her own testimony, the twenty-six days she spent in Buen Pastor were days she never regretted. In fact, she has called them a blessing in disguise, a rare opportunity to know herself in the face of adversity and to feel the manifest power of human understanding and co-operation. Some of Victoria's friends have suggested it was an experience that changed her life; it made her more humble, according to some, more politically aware, according to others. Jorge Luis Borges has said that it made her less domineering; before that, he confessed, she was the only person he knew who could make him feel like a child in her presence.'⁷⁰

Victoria, like many political prisoners under Perón's government, was jailed without reason or formal charges. Her house was searched and her address book taken. She was fingerprinted then questioned about the 1953 bomb that exploded in the Plaza de Mayo when Perón was giving a speech. Because Perón held members of the upper class responsible for the bombing, he assumed Victoria was one of the masterminds.

When Victoria's friends and colleagues learned of her imprisonment, they rallied to demand her release. From Waldo Frank to Aldous Huxley, word quickly spread throughout the world of Victoria's unjust situation. It was Gabriela Mistral (one of Victoria's dearest friends), however, who petitioned for her release and through her status as Nobel Laureate, ultimately achieved success. On the 27th of May 1953, Mistral sent a cable to Perón on behalf of Victoria. "Am profoundly shocked by news of Victoria

Ocampo's imprisonment. I beg your excellency to liberate her in consideration of her great contributions to Argentina, Latin America, and Europe. Will be grateful for your intervention. Gabriela Mistral." A copy was sent to the Associated Press in New York for worldwide publication.'⁷¹ And less than a week later, Victoria was released from Buen Pastor. Although appreciative of Gabriela's efforts, (quietly) Victoria was not pleased that she had 'begged' Perón to 'intervene', given he was the man who had irrationally imprisoned her.

* * *

To my surprise, Plaza Italia, which I had passed numerous times on the bus, had dozens of second hand book stalls. I found it because I got off, accidentally but to my delight, at the wrong subte stop. The afternoon felt gentle. School children ate ice cream and buses passed by with a little less recklessness. The stalls reminded me of those along the Seine; they went on for miles, like dozens of Aladdin's caves full of paper, print and possibilities. Meandering and trying desperately to keep my cool, I asked the man on the first stall if he had Carlos Andreola's biography of Alfonsina. He took a deep drag from his cigarette, scratched his chin and told me to wait a minute. He was missing two fingers on his right hand, his t-shirt was covered in what I hoped was ketchup and his face was heavily creased.

'Here you are señorita.' He waited until I held out both hands for this extremely rare edition held together by Scotch tape.

'How much?' I asked, even though I knew I would pay him the asking price. I did not have the heart to bargain with him, even if that was part of the game.

'Twenty pesos.'

‘Fine,’ I said casually but he just stared. Twenty pesos was less than eight dollars for me. I gave him the money and he kissed my cheeks several times.

A few stalls further down, I found a couple of Victoria’s autobiographies missing from the stack Graciela had let me copy. It was a miracle! This time, the stall owner saw through me. He knew what had transpired previously (word travels quickly) and suggested a ridiculous price.

‘Seventy-five pesos.’ He fiddled with the pencil behind his ear. ‘These are impossible to find and this is the price you must pay.’ I looked at him: I mean really looked at him. Mine had been the perfect day and although I did not want to bargain these sellers down to an entirely reasonable price, I knew when I was being had.

‘That’s pretty high for a book.’

‘This is what you must pay.’ He took the pencil from his ear and stuck it in his mouth.

‘Well, I’m sorry but I don’t have that much to spend.’

‘You try going to another stall. They will tell you the same as me.’

‘Fair enough,’ I told him, not trying to be nasty, just trying to leave.

‘Wait,’ he held onto my arm.

‘Yes?’

‘I will sell you the book for seventy pesos.’ Immediately I realised getting away from his stall would be anything but simple.

‘No, but thank you. I’m just going to look around.’

‘Sixty?’

‘Señor, what is a fair price for this book? I’m not interested in cheating you but I will pay what is fair. If you tell me what you feel to be fair, what the other vendors are charging for this same copy, then I will pay you that price. If you are trying to cheat me, then I’ll walk away now. It’s up to you.’

He took a carton of Jockey cigarettes from his pocket and offered me one. I shook my head. Suddenly, I felt incredibly American and was anxious to get on with things. This man was drawing the situation out intentionally. It was beginning to aggravate me.

‘Well?’

‘Twenty pesos is what the other stalls will charge you for this book but I am desperate.’

‘Okay, I will give you thirty but that is as high as I’m willing to go.’

‘Thirty is good.’ He smiled reaching for a brown paper bag for the book. I took thirty pesos from my pocket and a deal was made; a deal that suited both of us.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rosario

There have been an infinite number of times when I felt deeply disturbed at being a woman, for although I have been able to forget that I am in the presence of men, they themselves have had great difficulty in forgetting that I am a woman.

– Alfonsina Storni

I left most of my things locked in a communal storage room at the Millhouse, trusting they would be safe, then began my journey to Rosario as soon as the subte opened. The station was mobbed (again, it was rush hour) and I stood on the platform squashed between various people dressed in black pin-striped suits. At the far end of the platform voices were raised and within seconds, a fight broke out between two businessmen. It was awful to hear the thud of bone on bone and bone on concrete but I was more worried about the fast-approaching train. The platform that, only moments before, had been crammed full of bodies was now nearly empty, aside from me and a few other brave or idiotic souls (however you might want to look at it). After several punches, two older men standing on either side of me decided to take matters into their own hands. Enough skin had been broken, blood was everywhere and contrary to every other public place, there was not a policeman in sight. These two men managed to break the fight up just in time for the train's doors to open. I boarded, along with all of the others, including the men who had been fighting.

Running from Retiro to the bus station was not easy. There were so many people, but I managed to make my bus with a few seconds to spare. As we drove away from the

city, I realised I could never become indifferent to the shanty towns with their tin roofs, barefoot children and diseased dogs.

The bus to Rosario was depressing. Most of the windows were cracked and the driver drove like a maniac. Wondering if my life was in danger but realising there was little I could do about it, I thought, instead, about Alfonsina as I watched the marshy pampas and leaning telephone poles scattered along the roadside. Every other gas station or restaurant was abandoned. Red bottlebrush bushes lay in clusters, matching the rooftops of a few pale estancias. Cigarette and ham advertisements, spent windmills, violet bougainvillaea, pine and eucalyptus trees popped up from time to time, along with persistent tollbooths and acres of sprouting wheat. The air smelled of burning vegetation and manure. There were hardly any other cars on the road but the sky was, as always, a perfect and unchallenged shade of blue.

When the bus pulled into Rosario's station, I instantly realised how different this city was from not only Buenos Aires but also Mar del Plata. Rosario felt more like a three-hundred-year-old town lost somewhere along the Spanish or even French coast. Because I arrived with no firm plans and knew I needed at least one to begin with, I bought a slice of pizza and an odd-tasting apple juice from a small Italian restaurant, then sat on the steps just outside the station to think. Two clowns lay across the steps below me smoking cigarettes and drinking beer straight from the can. Beside the steps, in a little park, naked children played with pigs on leashes. Along the edge of the pavement, litres of neon liquid sat like exhibits in a modern art gallery. A man tried selling them to any car or pedestrian interested in his magical juice. I finished my slice of pizza and decided to find the city centre.

There was a young girl with long black hair selling newspapers from a stall in the park. I asked her if she could point me in the right direction.

‘It is safer for you to walk up Cordoba. You are all alone?’

I told her I was.

‘Then you must not take any other street.’

I started walking up Cordoba with my bag strapped to my back. The sun blinded me, its harsh rays frying my arms and nose. All of the buildings along Cordoba were half dust, half structure. The windows were long, from ceiling to floor, with turquoise shutters flung wide open. Because Rosario was once a thriving port for European trade, a city that had, in the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries, a larger population than Buenos Aires, I was surprised by its deterioration.

‘Want a ride?’ Two boys with a donkey and cart passed me. They whipped the poor creature over and over again until it let out a helpless whimper.

‘What are you doing? Don’t hit him!’ I screamed but my protests only made the boys whip harder. ‘Stop it! Please!’

Pointing and laughing, they spoke in tandem. ‘Gringa, don’t tell *us* what to do.’ They carried on whipping the donkey until they disappeared around a corner.

The farther I walked, the more parks I passed and each had their own distinct feel. In the Plaza San Martín there was a fountain where birds bathed and beside it, an old man sat watching a dragonfly struggle with its broken wing. There must have been thousands of dragonflies in that park but the old man could not take his eyes off the injured one. Finally he rose and scooped the insect into his pocket.

Cordoba eventually transformed into a pedestrian mall with a few shoe shops and bakeries. Every other shop was boarded up, covered in lazy graffiti. The sun seemed to be slipping, although still hot, and I needed to find the tourist office quickly.

I passed the stately Monumento Nacional a la Bandera where the first Argentine flag, designed by Manuel Belgrano, rests beneath an enormous tower. Flags encircle the spotless plaza that overlooks the milky River Parana, the second largest river in all of South America. Intrigued but anxious, I pressed on.

I arrived at the tourist office exhausted. When the girl behind the counter realised I had walked from the station, she got up immediately and brought me a glass of water.

‘Sit down, sit down,’ she repeated, ‘It’s so far.’

She had white shadow painted up to her eyebrows. Her plump fingers tapped excitedly on the desk. I mentioned my project with the hope she might know something about Alfonsina but unlike those I had previously met in Buenos Aires, she shrugged her shoulders helplessly. Overhearing us, her older colleague peered through the doorway.

‘I knew Alfonsina’s sister. She used to live only six streets from the bus station and had a collection of letters from Alfonsina. I don’t know where they went when she died. Like everything in Argentina today, they have probably been stolen. The government should do more. It’s a terrific loss. Our history is disappearing without any records. What will be left for the children?’

Asking if she knew more, she could only shake her head. ‘I’m sorry but that is all I can give you.’

The woman with the white eye shadow took over, booking me a room at the Alvear Hotel.

‘You will like it there,’ she insisted. ‘It’s where all the porteños stay.’

Half an hour later, I found the Alvear, unpacked my things then rang Norma Allocatti, who I had met previously at the Women Writer’s Conference in Buenos Aires. She told me to meet her the following afternoon at her husband’s kitchen boutique. Giving me the address, she promised she would show me the house where Alfonsina grew up.

It had been a long day and for the first time in a while, I felt far away from everything. In Buenos Aires, I knew people and I knew my way around, but Rosario could have been on the tip of Antarctica as far as I was concerned. Loneliness clung to me and although I did not need company, company would have been nice. Looking out of my hotel window, I watched the sun set over the city. The view reminded me of Mexico City: concrete rooftops alive with chickens, plants and drying laundry. The breeze blew through the serene tangerine sky. I concentrated on an old woman collecting her washing then on a curious dog wandering from one building to another, looking for something to do.

* * *

The following morning, rays of clear light floated in through the thin drapes of my room. I opened the windows and let the fresh morning air wrap round me. Everything was still. Birds chirped from full green branches, dogs snored in doorways. After some toast and two cups of black coffee, I left the hotel’s buffet with my map in hand and began walking towards the Biblioteca Nacional. On my way there, I took a detour to see the birthplace of Ernesto Ché Guevara. A few months previously, I read his *Motorcycle Diaries*, an exciting narrative about his journey through South America on the back of a bike. At the

time, young Ernesto was studying to become a doctor. Intrigued by leprosy, his journey was marked by visits to various leper colonies. Standing in front of his home, the breeze brushing against my neck, I wondered what he was like as a child and how or even if Rosario affected him.

I arrived at the Biblioteca as the doors were opening. Young schoolchildren and teenage students rushed into the building with great enthusiasm. There were no guards, no passport checks, only a stained glass ceiling and rows of well-organised books. For a while, I looked around but there was so much information I was not sure where to begin. Eventually, I felt a hand on my shoulder. A woman with a sharp nose and identification badge clipped to her waist asked if she could help.

‘Yes. I’m looking for articles on Alfonsina Storni.’

‘For Alfonsina, it’s best if you go to the smaller library on 1553 Santa Fe. They deal in newspaper and magazine clippings. You will find everything you need there. When you exit the building, take your first left.’

Thanking her, I left the library to enter a much smaller building made of marble with a doorway that yawned. Inside, the hallway was crowded with several old-fashioned catalogue boxes. Across from the boxes, a man stood behind a counter. He had the widest smile I have ever seen.

‘Hello señorita. How can I help?’

‘Well, señor...’

‘No, no. You must call me José.’

‘Okay. José, I’m looking for information on Alfonsina Storni.’

‘No problem. Please, take a seat over there. I will be back with the catalogue.’

Gesturing to the long wooden tables in the adjacent room, he momentarily vanished.

Minutes later José returned with four green leather bound books.

‘In these you will find many articles. Choose whatever you wish and we will copy them for you to take away. We are open until one, then we close the library for lunch. But please, stay, as long as you like. Here, give me one of those books.’ He reached over the stack beside me. ‘I will help you look.’

People drifted in. Like me, they had various green books filled with old newspaper articles.

‘What are you doing, José?’ A man peered through a hole in the wall.

‘Helping this woman find articles on Alfonsina.’ He leaned over to me. ‘That is Lorenzo. He makes the copies.’

Lorenzo came out from the darkness. He had a lazy eye and I was not entirely sure which eye to follow.

‘Anything you need, I keep in that room.’ He lifted his arm behind him. ‘In there, I have shelves and shelves of these books. If you want something copied, you ask me.’

‘Thank you. I will, Lorenzo.’

Lorenzo took my hand in his.

‘Come share maté with me,’ José insisted, taking me by the arm into his office. He produced a thermos and wooden gourd. ‘This bombilla is from La Boca. Have you been to La Boca yet?’ I nodded. ‘It’s an interesting place – no?’ José handed me the gourd and the bombilla, a metal-type of straw. The maté looked like dried basil. The first cup was terribly bitter and my lips puckered.

‘You don’t like maté?’ José looked upset.

‘No, it’s just I’ve only tried it once before. It takes some getting used to.’

‘Yes, I suppose it does for people who have not grown up drinking it.’

Lorenzo stood in the doorway. ‘You must come with me. I have some articles to show you.’ Unwillingly, José let me go.

Lorenzo’s workspace was cramped. The tall shelves balanced between the ceiling and floor. Unlike the reading area, his workspace was dusty and dark.

‘Here, this book. Look.’ Lorenzo beamed with pride. ‘This is my son.’ Lorenzo opened one of the leather bound books full of articles on his son. ‘He plays the guitar and harmonica. You know, he is only fifteen but teaches other children how to play.’

Lorenzo went on about the accomplishments of his son until a small stern woman with protruding blue eyes appeared in the doorway.

‘Estella.’ Lorenzo spoke with disappointment.

‘I hear this woman is looking for information on Alfonsina.’ She took a firm grasp of my arm. ‘Come with me.’ Looking back to Lorenzo she shouted, ‘Finish those photocopies for this nice young lady. I will help her find more.’

Estella brought me back into the reading room. ‘Now, tell me,’ she said, her blue eyes transfixed. ‘What do you think about the state of Argentina? It is awful no? Not for you, your currency goes so far here. How lucky you are to live in a stable country. You know why the Argentines take so much time with each other? Because they have plenty of free time! That is the only thing we have left – time.’

I told her I was grateful for her time and her help.

‘Oh, please.’ She raised her hands up. ‘I love helping you because then I learn too. I will learn more about Alfonsina than I knew yesterday. You know, there is a small lane named after Alfonsina near Plaza Lopez in Rosario.’ Estella’s voice almost squeaked. ‘In Rosario, we love Alfonsina. Lorenzo – ’ Estella shouted, disturbing those peacefully reading. I could see Lorenzo mimicking her. ‘Fionita needs these pages copied. Hurry up!’ Within seconds, Lorenzo stood beside me, asking what else he could do to help.

By the end of the morning, after I had copied every article relating to Alfonsina in the entire library, the four of us sat in José’s office sipping mate from the communal gourd. ‘Why don’t you get an Argentinean boyfriend and stay in Rosario? Rosario is the home of Ché, Alfonsina’s childhood memories and all things *tranquilas*.’ They spoke together and were upset to see me go.

‘Thank you for everything,’ I repeated, realising that even in Rosario, I was not alone.

Crossing the streets like a local with purpose, I had an hour to spend before I met Norma, and wondered what to do next. I passed through long avenues bordered by various types of palm trees, over tiles that made the walkways look wavy. After stumbling into a music shop, immediately I knew I was in the right place. It had been ages since I listened to music, something I did not recognise I missed until I was immersed by it. Deeply, I breathed in and began to wander. Bono called out through the shops’ speakers and it took all of my self-control not to sing loudly along, so I casually mumbled *Where the Streets Have No Name* to myself. After the track changed to something less familiar, my curiosity about Argentine music grew and I decided to ask

the girl behind the front desk for her suggestions. She flicked the piercing in her tongue with her teeth as she led me to an aisle at the back, encouraging me to sample the music before I bought it.

‘Take these headphones and if you find an album you want to listen to, bring it to me. I’ll hook it up to this system,’ she motioned with her forehead. ‘Plug the headphones in there.’

The first CD I chose was Mercedes Sosa. She sung a song written by Felix Luna and Ariel Ramirez, dedicated to Alfonsina, *Alfonsina y el Mar*.

Te vas alfonsina con tu soledad
Que poemas nuevos fuiste a buscar ...?
Una voz antigua de viento y de sal
Te requiebra el alma y la esta llevando
Y te vas hacia alla como en sueños,
Dormida, alfonsina, vestida de mar ...

...You go away Alfonsina and your solitude goes with you
What new poems were you looking for ...?
An ancient voice of wind and salt
breaks your heart and carries it away
and you follow it as if in dreams,
Alfonsina, sleeping, Alfonsina wrapped in the sea...

It was sad and slow, just like the sea, reconfirming my previous assumption that the famous who die young are usually remembered for the way they died and not necessarily the way they lived. The girl with the piercing suggested the second CD to me.

‘Léon Gieco is incredible,’ she spoke softly. ‘All of his songs are about Argentina. He’s our Bob Dylan.’ And she was right. When I put on the first song, I could not help but turn the volume up. Not only were his songs political, they were poetic and rooted in local themes. I picked the third CD because of its popularity. Charley Garcia’s

name is synonymous with rock. He has been around for a long time and, like the Rolling Stones, continues to play regardless of grey hair or wrinkles.

After my hour of unashamed indulgence, I found the kitchen boutique Norma asked me to meet her in and instantly felt out of place. There were all sorts of elegant tables, cutlery, napkins and glasses, and I was hardly dressed for the occasion. Within two days, I had regressed, fashion-wise, to the beginning of my trip. Once again, I was in flip-flops and jeans while the rest of the city, or at least those I was meeting with, wore designer suits.

It took a little while for Norma to warm to me but once she did, she wanted to show me everything. She drove me through the low narrow streets of Rosario to the area where Alfonsina used to live; a house on 3699 Mendoza. No longer a home but ice cream shop, we parked the car, locked my bag in the boot, then went inside. Turquoise beads hung from the doorway. Fish tanks and bamboo wallpaper encased the boxy room. An older woman in uniform with a matching pink hat asked what flavour we wanted. There were dozens and although very tempted, I declined, realising we were there to work, not eat the rich and unbelievably delicious ice cream.

Beside Norma, I felt very small. She towered above me and spoke for the two of us, asking the ice cream vendor if she knew anything about Alfonsina. Cleaning the counter, she threw the cloth aside.

'I don't know about this woman but try the bakery next door.' I took one last look at the parlour, thinking about Alfonsina's childhood in the place. *When I was ten my father's fortune had been completely used up, and we left San Juan so that our downfall would be less noticeable. And ever since then, and I am not shy about saying this, I had*

*to cope with life by myself. Up until that time I was used to being waited on, but my father was seriously ill, and my mother lacked the energy to take care of the situation properly. If it interests you, I can tell you that I worked with my hands – a decision I made on my own – and by the time I was twelve I was earning the rent. I can assure you that I earned it with the pride and joy that only a child my age, in the same circumstances, could possibly understand.*⁷²

The old wooden bakery smelled of yeast and butter. A long counter ran from one length of the room to the other, where locals leaned and sipped small cups of coffee. Fresh crumbs covered the floor. The walls showed off black and white photographs of the area from 1934. Most of the buildings in the photographs were simple one-storey structures with a few square windows and low hanging doors. Unlike today, the streets were immaculate and wide. There were few cars. The signs hanging from shops were in basic letters. Nothing flashed. Men and women wore hats and tailored jackets.

‘Sorry ladies but we cannot help you with Alfonsina. She was before our time.’ The man in the apron dusted the flour from his hands. Great clouds lifted up in the air.

The clock kept ticking. Both Norma and I were overly aware of the passing time. We walked quickly down Mendoza Avenue, looking for a shop where Norma could photocopy the few articles she had set aside for me. But we were out of luck and my bus was scheduled to leave in ten minutes. If only she had asked me to meet her earlier.

Jumping back in Norma’s car, we sped to the station only to find a café across the street advertising a photocopy machine.

‘Perfect!’ Norma said, skidding into the parking lot.

‘But my bus?’

‘Don’t worry, we have time for this,’ Norma insisted, with the articles in hand.

Inside the café a balding man, the size of a champion wrestler, polished plates to tango music. In the corner, a plastic Christmas tree decorated in tacky lights flashed irregularly. Although small, the shop was well organised: cigarettes, cans of soda, biscuits and crackers all stood separated on individual shelves.

‘Can you copy these, señor?’ Norma asked cautiously.

‘The machine is broken today but have a beer instead.’ He reached to the cans of warm beer on the shelf behind him with both arms.

‘No, thank you – we have a bus to catch.’ Norma took me by the hand. She was now on a mission to get me to my bus, no matter what, and she did, all the while promising she would post the articles to me. True to her word, the articles were waiting for me back in Glasgow upon my return.

* * *

The journey back to Buenos Aires was, to say the least, distressing. If only I *had* missed the bus and stayed in Rosario.

‘My mother was English and my father Argentinean. That is why my English is perfect.’ The lanky reserve driver informed me, unprovoked, then asked me to move my things so he could take the seat beside me.

‘You are very beautiful. You know when I worked on the cruise ships I had a Scottish girlfriend. You remind me of her.’ He disappeared momentarily, returning with a creased photograph in a heart-shaped frame. ‘See how much you look like her?’ I looked nothing like her. ‘That was twelve years ago. Now I am old, my hair is grey but don’t let that fool you. I still take many lovers.’

I tried ignoring him.

‘Why don’t you come away with me to Mar del Plata? My wife and children are not expecting me home for another week.’ His small eyes had an uncomfortable sting about them.

‘I’m not interested and besides señor, I’m married.’ With that, I opened up my book.

‘So you are married too. Now we have something in common.’

‘I don’t think so. You’re not my type.’ The sarcasm went right over his head but he did, temporarily, change the subject.

‘Do you know that each part of Argentina attracts certain types of people? Misiones has the Nazis, Rosario the Italians and Mafia, Buenos Aires the Spanish and Portuguese. But the Jews, they are everywhere.’

‘Look, I’d rather be alone.’

‘Now, why would I want to leave you all alone? I haven’t told you why I love Argentina. I love Argentina because it’s a safe place. I have many freedoms: the freedom to travel and of course the food is delicious and the streets aren’t full of junkies and blacks like in the rest of the world.’

‘If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll scream.’ I gave him a stern look as I tried remembering the moves I had learned in self-defence class. This was the type of situation my mother had always feared I would find myself in while travelling. The last thing I wanted was her nightmare (and mine) to become a reality.

‘Okay. I will leave you alone only if you give me a gift. A lock of your hair, that ring on your finger *or* your address in Scotland.’

‘I’m not going to give you anything.’ I could feel my voice shaking.

‘Then I will follow you.’

‘What?’

‘Give me a kiss. You must because now we are friends.’ He began struggling with me, holding onto my face. ‘Your blue eyes, they remind me of my mother’s.’

I started to scream loud enough for all of Rosario and Buenos Aires to hear. The bus pulled over to the side of the road. Everything fell silent. I reached into the side pocket of my backpack for my pocketknife and flicked open the blade. I imagined the worst until three small farmers from the back of the bus grabbed a hold of the guy beside me.

‘It’s okay señorita. He won’t bother you again.’ They said as they pushed him aside then sat around me like a brick wall until the bus arrived in Buenos Aires. And the moment it did I took off running as fast as I could into the crowd comforted, like Alfonsina once was, by the anonymity of all the faceless strangers.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Montevideo

[W]hy should the dead be locked up in a gilded cage? Their work lives on as their best testimony, far superior to any critical opinion. The greatest homage one can pay a writer is to refrain from burying his tragedy with bouquets of beautiful words. We should try, instead, to penetrate its meaning without being afraid to face the truth.

– Alfonsina Storni

After collecting the rest of my things from the Millhouse, I went down to the docks and bought a return boat ticket to Montevideo. The terminal bustled with hundreds of international passengers and there was a despondent three-piece Jazz band playing in the far corner of the waiting room.

Outside a storm brewed; lightning flashed in the distance, its thunder not far behind. The River Plate's murky water looked angry and I wondered if it was a good idea to sail across it. Regardless of the weather I wanted to see Montevideo as well as the clean side of the River Plate and I needed to get sufficient distance between me and the psycho bus driver from Rosario. Montevideo would be the perfect place to lie low for a few days.

Lightning split the sky open above me as I walked down the platform to the enormous hovercraft. Everything was dark. I stored my things next to a chair near the front of the ship then stood beside the window watching the rest of the passengers filtered in.

Because of the weather, the river and the rain pounded away any view. The constant rocking of the ship put me to sleep and when I awoke most of the passengers had disembarked. The cabin was empty and for an instant I forgot where I was.

Setting foot on Uruguayan soil rattled me a bit. No longer in Argentina, I began to see the face of a poorer South America. Forget grand architecture, curling balconies and bougainvillaea: Montevideo resembled a ravaged war-torn city. Everything was grey, broken and crumbling. Tower blocks lay in tall, tired rows. Rusty old Chevies gasped as they jerked out of the parking lot.

Tracing the river's cleaner edge, I started to walk towards the city centre and in the process, I thought about Uruguay's history.

The Uruguayan political prisoners may not talk without permission, or whistle, smile, sing, walk fast, or greet other prisoners; nor may they make or receive drawings of pregnant women, couples, butterflies, stars, or birds.

One Sunday, Didaskó Pérez, school teacher, tortured and jailed for having ideological ideas, is visited by his daughter Milay, age five. She brings him a drawing of birds. The guards destroy it at the entrance to the jail.

On the following Sunday, Milay brings him a drawing of trees. Trees are not forbidden, and the drawing gets through. Didaskó praises her work and asks about the colored circles scattered in the treetops, many small circles half-hidden among the branches: *'Are they oranges? What fruit is it?'*

The child puts a finger on his mouth. *'Ssssshhh.'*

And she whispers in his ear: *'Silly, Don't you see they're eyes? They're the eyes of the birds that I've smuggled in for you.'*⁷³

Unlike Argentina, you got the sense that people here had yet to recover. There were no Madres marching, no picket signs or white scarves, only weary quiet people with little light in their eyes.

I jumped over puddles and muddy pavement strips until I found a street that looked promising. There were a few bargain clothing shops, several lottery stands, fruit stalls and Western Union agencies on every other corner. Women stopped in the road to chat with friends leaning over window ledges, while their children found distraction by

kicking empty cans. The weather was still keeping in my favour, so I walked until I came to a bank. I asked the teller if she could exchange US dollars.

‘No,’ she said curtly.

‘Do you know where I can exchange money then?’

‘No,’ she repeated, looking to the customer behind me.

As I began to leave a woman in suede with carefully combed curls took me aside. She was very talkative and told me that, if I wanted to go with her, she would take me to the local bureau de change. She seemed sincere, so I followed her.

Together we walked up the busy pedestrian lane. She spoke with such speed that I had to actively listen just to get the gist of what she was saying.

‘I know the man behind the counter here.’ She held her purse tightly against her chest. ‘He will give you a good rate of exchange but make sure you get a receipt. You know why I came here?’ She gave me no time to ask. ‘Because my family live in Mexico, in a town that borders Texas. They send me dollars. It is impossible to live in Montevideo without a little money from outside.’ And with that, she kissed my cheek.

When I came out, she was waiting for me.

‘I forgot to tell you to carry your purse on the inside of your clothes. Put your money in your bra like this.’ She reached into her blouse and showed me where she stashed hers.

‘Okay,’ I said with a mixture of gratitude and shock.

‘The thieves are very good here. They ride by on scooters and will cut your purse from you.’

‘Thank you señora,’ I said as she kissed me again.

‘No problem,’ she waved as she walked back towards the river.

I quickly found the tourist office and, much like in Rosario, I was the only tourist in it. Two young guys behind the counter recommended I stay at the Casablanca Hotel.

‘It’s cheap and not far from here.’ When I mentioned I was looking for information on Alfonsina, they told me there was a Writers’ Museum on 1122 Canelones.

An automatic bell announced my entrance at the Casablanca. It was the kind of place you expect to find in a port town, where sailors and drifters go. There was a sombrero nailed to the wall, overgrown plants hung over tables and chairs, the furniture had not moved for the greater part of forty years. Within seconds a small, fat woman walked out of the kitchen.

‘Ah, you come from Europe. I can tell because I am European too. I am Spanish. I tell you what, I will give you the last room I have for \$8, US dollars not Uruguayan money. It is a big room, with three beds. I could rent it out for much more but for you, I will give you this deal.’

She showed me the room. The creaking doors reached to the ceiling. The room lacked windows. An old-fashioned fan creaked methodically above the dipping beds. The yellow toilet and sink were off to the right.

‘Okay,’ I told her, placing my bag on the floor.

‘Yes?’ She seemed surprised.

‘It’s fine.’

‘Good. I told you it’s a deal. But you must pay me now.’

I counted out sixteen dollars.

* * *

I slept into the late hours of the morning and woke up starving. The last proper meal I had eaten was three days previously. My guidebook listed a few vegetarian restaurants. I picked one, La Vegetariana, then began walking back towards the Plaza Independencia. In the plaza, a group of large gypsy women flocked towards me. They grabbed at my clothing, begging, pleading for money until a couple of businessmen passed by. I soon became of little importance as they migrated, collectively, towards the bodies in suits.

I was completely overwhelmed by La Vegetariana. I have been to a lot of vegetarian restaurants in various parts of the world but they do not compare to what Montevideo has to offer. La Vegetariana hosted an extensive buffet of both hot and cold foods for less than \$3. The twenty-foot salad bar brimmed with avocados, beets, sprouts, tomatoes, carrots, pineapple, mango, four kinds of lettuce, six kinds of dressing and five cold pasta dishes. The hot side, twice as long as the cold, served even more pastas, rich cheesy quiches, lasagne, seitan fried in breadcrumbs (like the Argentines do with their meat), stuffed bell peppers, eggplant caviar, four types of soups, ravioli, pizza, tofu with broccoli, chickpea curries, falafel, dozens of fresh rolls, an assortment of cheeses and for dessert, chocolate pudding, fruit salad and a variety of unbelievably divine cakes. This place was my dream come true, my oasis in the middle of a meaty desert. For the first time in a long while, people would not look at me peculiarly when I mentioned I was vegetarian.

I ate until I was full, and then I ate some more. La Vegetariana gave me the time to read all of those articles I had accumulated in Rosario and make a dent on some of the books I had copied from Graciela. It was a well spent afternoon.

Upon leaving the restaurant, I complimented the hostess on the food, or rather feast. As we were talking, a woman with purple hair passed through the front door. She overheard my accent and became so excited, I thought she might burst.

‘Come join me for a drink,’ she insisted and would not take no for an answer.

We sat at a table far from the front door and she shared her life with me, just like that, as if I was her best friend.

‘I am a secondary teacher. Many years ago, I taught in the public schools but now I teach in a private school. Everyone chooses to teach in the private sector because there is no money in the public one.’

She reached into her purse for photographs. ‘This is my son Gabriel. He is your age, about twenty.’

‘Señora, I am no longer twenty.’

‘You look close enough.’ The señora was too kind. ‘Gabriel is a medical student. He wants to be a sports doctor when he finishes. These are his baby photos and this was his first day at school.’ She had an entire album in her purse. I’m sure Gabriel would be mortified if he knew what his mother was doing.

‘My name is Suzanna. Do you have some paper?’

I took out my notebook.

‘This is my full name and address. Wait here.’ She ran to the buffet and filled her plate for the second time. ‘Where are you staying in Montevideo?’

‘In a hotel around the corner.’

‘No, no. You must stay with me. Yes! Come and stay with me and Gabriel. I’ll sleep in Gabriel’s room and you can have my room.’

‘That’s very kind of you señora but – ’

‘No. Call me Suzanna.’

‘Well Suzanna, I’m afraid I have already paid for my room.’

Suzanna finished her plate and went back to the buffet for more. When she returned, she patted my hand, ordered another round of Diet Sprites then took a fresh napkin. Each time she wiped her mouth, she took a fresh napkin.

‘Oh, but you must stay with us. You would like Gabriel. He is a quiet, introverted young man. You must stay.’

‘Next time.’

‘Okay, but you *must* stay with us next time.’

We parted with an embrace and several kisses. Rain fell in sheets and I braved it without an umbrella because I did not have one. I wanted to find the Writer’s Museum and with the address in my pocket, began walking towards 1122 Canelones.

From the outside, the building looked like an office, which seemed a little strange. A guard and old man smoked together beside the front door. I asked them if I was in the right place. They looked at me amused.

‘Writer’s Museum?’ The old man shook his head. ‘It does not exist. Come with me.’ He paused to step on the end of his cigarette. ‘You may use my phone. Call the Writer’s Association. I have their number on my desk.’

I rang the Writer’s Association and was put through to the President, Iris Bombet, who insisted I call her by her first name.

‘You must come to my house! Can you make five o’clock today? We will speak about Alfonsina there.’

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kind Strangers

I would like to serve my country by making its culture better known abroad. I think that writers would make excellent consuls because they could reflect the social realities of the countries they represent through public lectures and newspaper articles.

– Alfonsina Storni

Montevideo is a city that drains her people. Is it the greyness? The lack of parks, birds and trees? I had a few hours to spend before I met Iris and wandered to a market beside the dockyards. Everyone stood around drinking maté. The cool Antarctic wind reached through the stalls of silver, wood and spitfire barbecues that cooked big slabs of meat over hissing flames. The smell of singed flesh filled the air.

I backtracked up Avenida 18 de Julio to the distinguished looking University, made of stone and shaped like the Parthenon. It was here, in 1938, that Alfonsina gave her last recorded public lecture. When asked about her poetry, she eventually found it easier to answer the audience's questions through her own. *Was my poetry just a form of rebellion, a way to communicate my discomfort? Did it give expression to an inner voice which had long been muffled? Did it reflect my thirst for justice, my longing to be in love with love, or was it a little music box that I had in my hand and which played all by itself, whenever it wanted to, without ever being stabbed by a key? At any rate, is not the poet a phenomenon which offers few variations, a subtle antenna which receives voices from nobody knows where, and then translates them nobody knows how?*⁷⁴

I pondered over this on the bus ride to Iris Bombet's flat. Music blasted from the driver's portable stereo and school kids in their white school smocks bounced up and

down to its rhythm. The bus kept going and I began to realise how big Montevideo really was. It was by no means limited to the city centre: there were suburbs, beautiful suburbs.

The school children continued to bounce as we turned the corner onto a pristine white sand beach surrounded by palm trees, lifeguard booths, joggers and cyclists. A flash of homesickness enveloped me; momentarily, I was back in California.

When I found Iris's apartment building, the doorman let me in and told me to take the lift up to the seventh floor. Iris stood there, ready to greet me with a warm smile and freshly painted nails (the smell of lacquer followed her into every room).

'Come in. Come in,' she insisted. 'It is so nice to meet you.'

The flat had several antique silk chairs, all encircled around a bay view window overlooking the sea. She introduced me to her friend sitting regally in one of the chairs.

'Hello,' she took my hand in both of hers. 'My cousin is the President of Uruguay. And before him, my Uncle was President.' She wore thick glasses and spoke without encouragement about her famous family and worldly travels.

'I speak French and Italian but cannot speak a word of English. It is good you speak Spanish so well.' She continued to hold onto my hand.

'Not so well señora but well enough.'

'You are too modest. Now sit.'

I did as I was told, reclining into a silk chair facing west. The sun hung just above the horizon. Before I knew it, two other women arrived. Iris introduced them as her family.

‘What religion are you?’ they asked, almost immediately. Somehow the seats had arranged themselves so that I was on one side of the room, while everyone else sat on the other. Who was conducting the interview?

‘I don’t practice religion.’

‘You don’t!’ They were mystified. ‘Well, what religion were you born with?’

‘Protestant, I suppose.’ Immediately I realised I should have lied and said I was a Catholic. They whispered amongst themselves.

‘And where are you staying in Montevideo?’ the woman in the thick glasses asked.

‘At the Casablanca.’

‘What is that? I have never heard of such a place.’

‘It’s a small hotel in the centre of town.’

‘Oh.’

There was more whispering. By this point in conversation Iris had left the room but before I could panic, she reappeared with a book in her hand.

‘Fiona, please, come here. I have something to show you.’ Iris was the type of person who glowed goodness. And not only that, she was so refined in her demeanour, so generous in spirit, she immediately put you at ease.

‘This is my book, *La Union*. It is about Montevideo and the barrio of Uruguay’s most famous woman poet, Juana de Ibarbouro.’ She was so proud of her literary achievement. ‘I wrote a poem at the end and beginning of this book. See – ’ She began reading it aloud, stopping to explain every line.

‘It is beautiful, señora.’

‘Please, take it. I would like you to have it. Now, Fiona, tell me about yourself.

Do you know any other Uruguayans?’

‘I know China Zorilla.’ The women in the silk chairs gasped. Iris stood perfectly still.

‘China? You’ve met her? Where?’

‘At her home in Buenos Aires.’

‘Oh, we adore China. Come, sit and tell us what she is like.’ I told them about our interview.

‘That’s so exciting,’ they repeated until Iris interrupted with a glass tray full of juice and biscuits.

‘You mentioned over the phone that you knew about Alfonsina.’ I questioned Iris as I accepted a biscuit.

‘The only thing I know about is the conference she attended here with Mistral and Ibarbourou in 1938. Aside from that incident, I know very little about her. But tell me, where are you from?’

‘San Francisco. I live in Scotland now.’

‘San Francisco? I love San Francisco. It is such a beautiful city.’ Iris’s eyes sparkled. It felt time to go.

‘Well, thank you señora. It’s been a pleasure meeting you, your friends and family.’

‘The pleasure was mine. A true delight.’

Smiling and kissing cheeks, I headed for the door until Iris’s friend with the thick glasses grabbed hold of my arm.

‘I will walk you to the bus stop,’ she declared.

Iris looked worried but refusing her friend’s offer was not an option. As we strolled, the dark clouds hovered above.

‘Let me show you something.’ She pulled on my arm with determination.

‘This palm tree is dedicated to Juana de Ibarbourou. Isn’t it lovely?’ The street was empty but she insisted we wait for the light to change before crossing. ‘And this monument is dedicated to the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral. Would you like to take my photograph beside it?’

‘Okay...’ I took my camera from my bag. ‘Are there any monuments dedicated to Alfonsina Storni?’

‘None that I know of. The flash did not work that time. Take another.’

Two photos and three blocks later, we stood together at the edge of the shore. I looked to the lightning in the distance as my newly acquired chaperone bent down to scoop up a handful of sand.

‘Just like the Sahara,’ she said in a voice that drifted off towards the sea.

The nickel clouds above us rolled into each other, dividing into a deluge of hard cool rain. All of the people who had previously been sitting on the wall separating beach from road ran for shelter, disappearing almost instantly.

‘Come, I will take you to the bus stop. You know most people try to befriend me because of my background. I don’t like people like that but you, you I like. You’re a good listener.’

‘Thank you for walking me here and please send my best to Iris.’

‘Wait.’ She turned to a silver haired woman in the queue. ‘Are you going into town?’ The woman nodded. ‘Then will you watch this young lady? Make sure no one speaks to her and make sure she gets off at the right stop.’

‘I will, señora,’ the woman smiled.

I felt about ten years old.

* * *

I woke up to the sound of alarms chiming. They refused to settle, so I was forced to rise at six. After taking an icy shower from a broken faucet, I packed up my things and let the Casablanca sink slowly into the distance. The fierce wind blew right through me. I had to find shelter until my ferry left and very little was open. After wandering a good few blocks, I found a café called The Manchester.

A black waitress asked me what I wanted.

‘Do you have anything vegetarian?’

‘I’ll have the chef make you something nice,’ she said putting her pad back in her apron pocket. ‘Toasted cheese and tomato sandwich. Is that okay?’

‘Perfect.’

She brought me a pot of tea and as I watched the young stumble in from the Saturday night out and the old stumble in from their Saturday night in, I realised that the borders of culture are no longer that different. In fact, they are becoming more and more similar with each passing day. That the farther you travel, the closer (in some ways) you are to home. I smiled to myself, warmed by the fact that I was stronger than I thought I was and that even though I might not have learned much about Alfonsina while in Montevideo, I understood why she might have appealed to the people of Uruguay. Like

them, she was working class. Like them, she was a single mother. Like them, she struggled but she also lived.

Chapter Thirty

Buenos Aires

There was a man in Paris who sold paté d'alouette, which is very expensive, but he sold it cheap. When someone asked him how he was able to sell the paté so cheaply, he said, 'I call it paté d'alouette, but there is horsemeat in it. Un cheval, une alouette: one horse to one lark.' And my writing is like that: I write, sincerely, about literature and writers, but there is a lot about life, a lot about myself – a lot of horse in it.

– Victoria Ocampo in an interview with Ronald Christ

Crossing the River Plate back to Buenos Aires felt like coming home. The storm had passed, bending the morning sky into a soft apricot line over the city's jagged edges. I already missed Buenos Aires but knew exactly where to spend my last few precious hours.

My bus left for Santiago early in the afternoon. I stored my things at the station then immediately made my way to the Biblioteca Congreso. This was my final chance to find the edition of *Sur* dedicated to women writers and I was determined to read it.

The wind raged. It knocked over potted plants. Tables and chairs from outdoor cafés were flipped on their sides. But I pressed on and when I got to the library, it pulsed with bodies. The man behind the counter checked my bag without a second glance and to my relief, the security guard with the pinkie ring had yet to arrive. The experience was already more pleasurable than the first time I visited. This I took as a good sign.

Unfortunately, the librarians were less than helpful, but once I engaged them in idle conversation, they found it difficult to be rude. With their exasperated help we found the edition of *Sur* I was looking for, a massive collection of fascinating work bound by an elaborate cover.

Because of its size, as well as my lack of time, I decided to photocopy the entire thing, the (by this time accommodating) staff were more than willing to assist. While I was waiting in the queue, a well-dressed man in his sixties with a raspy voice approached me. His accent sounded more Italian than anything else.

‘I’m copying a letter from my mother,’ he proclaimed rather dramatically then lifted a blue folder from beneath his blazer to show me two blown up photos; one of his mother in her youth and the other from present day.

‘She is beautiful – no?’

‘Yes señor, your mother is very beautiful.’

‘Do you have much to copy?’

‘I’m copying a book. It is out of print and extremely difficult to find.’

‘Ah – ’ he let out an enormous breath. ‘Then you must join me for a coffee. It will take much time for them to copy a book for you. Come with me.’ It was my own fault. I should have lied but something told me not to refuse his offer. This was the type of man you did not want to upset.

We walked to a crowded café across the street, with wide open windows and stained wood panelling. When he told me he was a member of Congress, nerves sunk deep into my bones. The man beside me, the doting son with sweet photos of his Italian mother, held one of the top positions in the Nation’s ‘Security Department’. What was that supposed to mean?

‘How long have you been working for the government, señor?’ I questioned, fearful of what the truth might actually bring.

‘Oh, it’s been a long, long time. More than thirty years. You lose count after a while but I do not want to talk about work.’

I was panicking because I knew what the ‘Security Department’ had done to Argentines in the past. Perhaps he had killed someone? I was sure he had been involved with the Dirty War. This was the type of situation I wanted to avoid, at all costs, but it was too late now. I quickened my step as he held the door to the café open.

We took a seat beside a window. The waiter appeared, took our order then rushed to the counter. He seemed eager to please the man sitting across from me.

‘I love music señorita. Music is my life. It is my first love,’ he admitted, then suddenly broke into operatic song. In between sentences, he sang until I thought the glasses on the table would shatter.

‘My family is Italian. All of us were born singing. But in Argentina, we sing Argentine ballads. Let me sing you this –’ He opened his mouth until the entire café and each passing pedestrian stood still to listen.

I sank down in my chair, stirring my coffee.

‘With the voice, you cannot drink or smoke. The voice is a fine-tuned instrument that needs constant care and attention. You must always look after your voice. Now, let’s have another coffee. Waiter –’ The waiter arrived immediately.

‘Señorita, thank you for your company. And when you return to Argentina, we will go to Café Tortoni and I will sing for you on the stage. We will dance! And remember, if you need anything or experience any trouble, call me. I have many friends, all in high places. My number is on the card.’

He escorted me back to the library, kissed my cheeks then held onto my hand for what felt like an eternity, wishing me luck several times. After collecting my photocopied edition of *Sur*, I began making my way to the station, sad to be leaving Argentina. It had taken hold of me, become a part of me and, even if only in a small way, I had become a part of Argentina. My footprints lay tucked away inside its beauty and its chaos, within the friends I made and the reflections I recorded. *[T]o seek hidden but necessary connections, connections that [reveal] a close relationship between the world where I was born in the flesh, and the other worlds where I was reborn, ha[s] ... been the enterprise of my whole life...I was seeking ambitiously to build bridges between literatures of different patterns and naturally different countries.*⁷⁵

Chapter Thirty-One

Santiago or Bust

It is a territory so small that on the map it ends up seeming like a beach between cordillera and sea, a parenthesis of space whimsically situated between two centaur-like powers. To the south, the tragic caprice of southern archipelagos, shattered and in shards, creates great gashes in the velvet sea. The zones are natural, clear, and definite, just like the character of the people.

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'Chile'

A young barefoot man hoisted both of my bags onto his bony shoulders then carried them to the base of the bus reading 'Santiago'. Stunned by his incredible strength but grateful for it, I gave him my remaining Argentine pesos. He shoved them into his pocket without a second glance, quickly returning to the parking lot for another load of what could have been hundred-pound luggage.

As the bus pulled out of the station, I watched the shantytowns, skyscrapers and wide empty motorways fade slowly into the distance. It broke my heart. I'm not one for hiding emotions and the stewardess of the bus noticed my distress. She immediately encouraged me to take the seat beside her in the front.

'It will be farther away from the toilets,' she insisted. She also told me they had maté. 'Come with me,' she said, gently taking me by the hand.

I collected my things and followed, not for the fresh air or the maté but for the company.

The sun was quickly setting over the flat golden pampas, a few random trees nestled in against the horizon and the plastic cup full of sweetened maté began making its

rounds. It felt like home and I wondered if I would ever find this kind of hospitality in Chile.

We passed over the Andes with the sun rising; soft rays of pink light brushed against the snow covered peaks. This part of the world sparkles, as if it is the purest patch of earth. You feel alive here and somehow reborn. I looked down from the bus to the vineyards of Mendoza climbing up the mountainside, full purple grapes winking in the dew of the dawn.

We crossed the border into Chile. The bus stopped abruptly and all passengers, including the drivers and stewardess, were marched off in single file line. Fruit and bulk goods were confiscated, all bags were unloaded and all passengers were told to stand in two lines, as security unpacked their things on to a cold metal table. The room was freezing and because of the altitude, several children were sick. The guards, indifferent to the children, went through a list of routine questions with each and every passenger.

Immigration took an eternity but when we re-boarded the bus, we had moved on to Chilean soil. The sky above was a deep cornflower blue and when set against the snow, it looked like the world had been flipped upside down. Everything was vibrant green. The rivers were clear and the roads smooth. Much like on the other side of the border, skeletons of abandoned cars and homes lay scattered along the roadside, only in Chile there were blooming birch trees and busy swallows hopping from one shiny stone to the next.

*In the lovely Valley of Chile
two weathers blend together;
it's heroic and it's gentle,
as old Homer was.*

It never bites with redhot

*sun, nor with long frosts;
its name is Temperate,
and Verdure, and Welcome.*⁷⁶

Each time the bus stopped at a traffic light, lemon-tinted butterflies and men with straw baskets flooded the aisle, the latter selling warm stacks of *pastelitos* (sweet frosted cakes) tucked carefully beneath tea towels. The earth transformed as we approached Santiago. The soil grew dry, almost red, the vegetation similar to what you would find in the desert and advertisements for just about everything were painted on the flat faces of boulders.

We arrived in Santiago twenty-one hours later to complete and utter chaos. The heat was unbearable, the air so polluted, I could hardly breathe. An anxious crowd of taxi drivers swarmed in around us, clutching at our clothing and luggage. I held on to my things and tried to find the nearest exit but the sporadic pulse of crowd confused me and when an unfamiliar hand grabbed my arm, my only option was to follow. In my sleepless state I was escorted by a stranger with an important-looking badge hanging around his neck. He smiled at me triumphantly, confirming that he had found me a taxi.

‘Now, you pay me,’ he demanded, the smile quickly disappearing.

‘For what?’

‘For finding you a taxi.’

‘But I never asked – ’

He held out his hand.

‘There are plenty of taxis here.’ I pointed to a long line of taxis on the adjacent street.

‘Yes,’ he replied seriously. ‘But señorita, not all taxis are good in Santiago. The taxi I have arranged for you is an honest one. In Chile, there is a price for that. There is a price for everything.’

The ‘good’ taxi driver assigned to me by the man with the badge had two teeth, one black eye and an enormous belly. I did not ask about his injuries. He was friendly enough but after twenty-one hours on a bus, the last thing I wanted was a chatty driver and a random tour of the city. I got the tour anyway.

I had asked him to take me to a little B&B that I had found on the web, described as a large airy house with a spacious garden and view of the Andes. Situated in the comfortable suburb of La Reina, the proprietor was an older woman who seemed kind, mellow but eager for guests. She advertised an authentic Chilean breakfast, peace and quiet, the opportunity to learn Spanish in a relaxed setting, a close proximity to all necessary amenities – including the city centre – and although she charged more than a hostel, I felt the experience of living with a native Chilean would be worth it.

When we arrived, I was, to say the very least, incredibly disappointed. In fact, I nearly burst into tears. Her spacious home was a small shack with rusty bars on the windows. The garden was full of rocks and weeds, the view of the Andes something you might be able to see with a ladder and an expensive pair of binoculars. If she were charging less I would not have been so upset but she was charging me a small fortune.

My battered two-toothed driver was just as impressed as I. He struggled to turn around in his seat, asking if my directions were correct. Dust from the dirt road hung heavy in the air. All I could do was feebly nod. The proprietor stood beside the taxi with her hands on her hips. She looked anxious.

Once inside the house, I was inundated with questions. Before I could even put my bags down, this little old woman cornered me in her dark, dank hallway that smelt of bug spray. Her face inches from mine, she began to cry.

‘I am so lonely but now I have you.’ She placed her head on my shoulder then cried some more. Shocked and dumb, I looked around the hallway sympathetically rubbing her back. There were dozens of porcelain horses, shot glasses from Australia, coffee cups from Texas and candles shaped like margaritas.

‘All alone,’ she gasped, pushing me into the wall.

‘Señora, could I please use your bathroom?’

‘What?’

‘The bathroom. I need to use the bathroom.’

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and dubiously held the adjacent door open for me.

‘This is the bathroom. I will give you the tour.’

‘No, señora. It’s okay. I’m sure – ’

She followed one step behind me.

‘This is how the faucets work.’ She turned both on. They creaked to let out a brown type of sludge. ‘And the shower is here. Push this to flush the toilet.’

‘Señora?’

‘Yes, yes.’ She spoke in a high-pitched squeak.

‘Where should I put my things?’

‘In here, you sleep in here. Next door to me. That way, I can hear you through the wall. Thin walls – listen.’ She tapped on the wall with her knuckles.

My new room consisted of two twin beds, side by side, with algae-coloured spreads and great dips in the centres. A small lamp sat in the far corner. There was a broken dresser beside the window. When I flipped on the light, several cockroaches scurried beneath the bed closest to the window.

‘This used to be my daughters’ room.’ Her tear-ducts let loose again. I gave her a tissue. ‘When they were small.’

‘Your daughters?’

‘Yes, when they turned eighteen they abandoned me to live in Australia. How can children do that to their mother? To their own flesh and blood? I gave them my life. Their father left us when they were only little girls. Now I never see them. We write emails and they help me with my web page – my youngest, she made that for me.’

‘It’s a very good web page, señora.’ *Full of lies*, I thought to myself not knowing if I should resent or pity the woman before me. I had been tricked, that much was clear and her room without a view was not cheap. I needed time to think.

‘I have to go to the store, señora. I’ve lost my toothbrush,’ was the best I could come up with.

‘When will you come back? Ten minutes? Twenty?’ She began to panic. ‘Not more than twenty? And you must pay me first.’

‘Of course.’ I dug deep into my pocket. ‘Here señora. Here’s \$22 as agreed.’

‘No, it’s increased to \$28 and what about the rest?’

‘\$28? The rest?’

‘Yes, my new web page says twenty-eight US dollars per night and you are planning to stay more than one night? I want all of the money now and it has to be in US dollars.’

Her eyes were bone dry. I gave her a further \$6. She folded it over then tucked it into her bra.

‘And the rest?’

‘Señora, my plans.’

‘What?’

‘My plans – they might change.’

‘Change?’

‘Yes, I mean, they’re still undecided. I need to make a few phone calls first. I have a friend here, a contact, who said I might be able to stay with her for free.’ This was a lie but it was all I could think of under pressure. ‘If that is the case, then I will have to leave in the morning. I’m terribly sorry but I have very little money left, señora, your room is too expensive for me now.’

‘No, it is not. My price is reasonable. You rich tourists can spend much more than this.’

‘Some, maybe, but not me, señora.’

‘Ungrateful young woman. How can you cheat me?’

‘Señora –’

‘How can you leave me?’

*** * ***

I walked to the market totally confused with Gabriela's words chanting loudly through my ears,

*Since I am a queen and I was once a beggar,
I now live with the pure fear of your leaving me
and pale, I ask you at all hours,
'Are you still with me? Oh, please don't abandon me!'*⁷⁷

Bad as I felt about this woman and her misfortune, I could not stay with her. Her rates were far too high (especially for what she was offering) and the idea of spending three solid weeks in her company was a little more than I could bear.

When I returned from the market, my mind was made up. I would confirm my story to the señora about the generous contact then go to the hostel a few travellers had fondly spoken of back at the Gardenhouse. The hostel was called La Casa Roja and it was cheap. I looked it up on my map. The location seemed perfect: right in the centre of the city and much as I resisted the idea of living with other travellers, my alternative was far less appealing. My plan was to leave in the morning.

* * *

The señora sewed beneath a bare light bulb late into the night. I could hear her machine turn over and over again, her teeth biting down hard on edges of crisp crackers. She spoke to someone in the shadows of her room. I tried not to listen but it was difficult to ignore. *I'll just go to sleep and when I wake up, it will be morning* – I told myself. Only when I awoke, it was 3a.m. and the señora was standing in my doorway.

'Are you okay señora?'

'You are awake?'

'Yes – '

She ran back to her room, slammed the door and the monotonous chug of the sewing machine measured out time until dawn broke. As soon as it did, I rang a taxi.

* * *

The twenty-stone taxi driver and I veered through rush hour traffic in a bashed up Peugeot held together by strips of silver tape. Staring out of the window I watched locals make their ways to work, in sunglasses and suits, briefcases tucked neatly beneath rigid arms. We were a good thirty minutes outside the city centre, a distance I failed to register the day before. What astonished me most about my first clear view of Santiago was how much it felt like a small city and that most of its people were white. I looked around the perimeters to the Andes, snow-capped and majestic, funnelling all pollution into a three-tiered mat of layered tawny smoke. Before the light even changed to green, the driver shifted gear and pressed on through an intersection that brought us back to the city's main street: O'Higgins. There was so much traffic, it took ages for us to reach our destination and once we did, the driver stopped in the middle of the street.

'Here we are,' he told me, turning off the engine. Cars began piling up behind us but the driver was indifferent.

'I'll leave your things on the front steps.' He hobbled to the boot of the car, lifted both of my bags with his left arm, took his fare, then disappeared back into the tide of traffic.

I stood at the base of the two large doors wondering if I was too early to check in and hoping they had room for me. I looked up to the computer print-out sign that read *La Casa Roja*. The building, red as promised, looked ready for demolition. The tall rectangular windows desperately needed replacing, the paint looked as old as the house

itself, dating back to what I assumed to be the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It had character, though, and with laundry hanging from the balconies, random cables interlaced through holes in the walls and music blasting through the wide open windows, I knew someone had to be home. I pressed the doorbell and waited.

Within seconds, a young Chilean woman opened the door. Her features were dark and her eye shadow was purple.

‘Come in,’ she invited. A black and white dog standing behind her sniffed my things. ‘That’s Dado. He doesn’t bite.’

Once in the hallway, the safety of the building looked questionable. Cement walls crumbled; great gaps in the floorboards gave you a view of the dirt foundation below. Dust and wooden planks lined the pathway that reached narrowly to a doorframe.

We entered the lobby, or what was supposed to be the lobby, and the woman who had greeted me took a seat behind the desk. There were a couple of Australian guys on a sofa in the corner. Dado sniffed them, then rolled over on his back.

‘How ya doin’?’ one of the Australians asked, as he threw the dog his half-eaten piece of toast.

The place had the feel of a bohemian retreat, a secret club for travellers who wanted something out of the ordinary but did not want to go very far to find it. It would do and at this point, anything was better than where I had come from.

‘We have one private room available,’ the girl from behind the desk said, looking up from the hostel diary. ‘You can have it if you want.’

‘Great.’

‘I’m Italia by the way.’ She stood up, turned around and pointed to the tattoo that read *Italia*, scrolled across the base of her back. ‘Just in case you forget.’

‘It’s nice to meet you.’

‘You too. Here’s your key.’

I took my things, with the help of the Australians, to my new room. It was clean with a firm bed and two French doors that opened out on to a garden full of building equipment and travellers still drinking beer from the night before. I drew the curtains, unpacked my things then walked through the rest of the house. Although a ‘fixer-upper’ and I use the term loosely, it had a pleasant feel to it. The house was built around two large open-air courtyards with ping-pong tables, barbecues and copious amounts of outdoor furniture. Natural light spilled over the rough wooden floors like autumn leaves. A fresh breeze rushed up the hallway.

After settling in, I decided to explore the city. The sky was clear and the sun scorching. At 9a.m., it already felt much hotter than Buenos Aires ever did. I rolled up my sleeves and walked past serious pedestrians and tacky dress shops until I found the main walkway thronged with people who looked tired and sad. Policemen in green uniforms protected every other corner block from nothing more than wild schoolchildren with melting ice creams.

Near the Plaza Vicuña Mackenna, a bearded guy in a baseball cap approached me with a folded slip of paper.

‘Are you Chilean?’ he asked.

‘No, but thanks for the flyer.’ He reeked of whisky. I tried to walk on but he would not let me.

'I am a poet and it's a poem, not a flyer. The poem is for you.'

'Thank you.' I attempted to walk around his other side. He stood in my way.

'I am a student at University and I have to pay for my education.' He looked a little old to be a student. That and the fact that his cologne was distilled spirits failed to convince me.

'Education isn't free in Chile.'

'It's not free in a lot of places.'

'Well, it's very expensive here. If you want to keep my poem then you have to give me money for it.'

'Really?'

'Yes. It is for my education.'

I gave him some change. He counted it carefully. Only then would he let me pass.

* * *

The tourist office was at the top of a set of marble stairs that curved around a fountain. It was one small room with a rack of out-dated brochures. A man with a moustache sat in the corner with his feet on a desk.

I asked him if he knew anything about Gabriela Mistral. He lit a cigarette, held the smoke in his mouth, placed a map of the city down in front of me then told me there was a mural of her just outside the building.

'If you walk down the stairs to the main road, you will see it.'

The mural stretched the length of the towering city wall, separating park from street. Mistral, standing in the centre, looks almost biblical with her blueberry robes and cape soaring high with the wind. Her silver hair is short; her face severe as she gazes

downward, with closed eyes, towards a group of naked children. There is no love or even warmth in the image. If anything, there is a frigid sense of isolation. Mistral's hands, disproportional to the rest of her rather feminine body, are huge and manly. Her left holds a book, her right, instead of reaching out to the children before her, remains firm against her own body. The children look to her. They lift their hands but she shows no recognition. To the right of Mistral's figure, a naked mother sits against a mountainside with her baby. She is the largest figure in the mural and unlike the other images, she and the baby are not in colour. The mother's eyes, like Mistral's, are closed; however, her baby stares longingly towards Mistral.

I did not understand it. If Mistral is supposed to be portrayed as the Mother of Chile here, the artist had made a mess of things. Or maybe, the artist was trying to show the irony of the situation, bringing light to the fact that although Mistral styled herself the Mother of Chile, she was far from it. How can one woman really *be* the mother of thousands? How can one woman assume that role when she proved, time and time again, to contradict it? How can one woman who spent her life away from Chile become mother of the Nation? Writer Elizabeth Horan suggests that, 'as ghost she could be a permanently virgin mother representing all that the national institutions of church, state, and school would ostensibly honour...her image could be fully co-opted without fear of her querulous, unpredictable interruption. Honouring Mistral thus became an empty ceremony of false tenderness, ostensibly recognising but actually dismissing impoverished children, agonising mothers, scorned schoolteachers, godforsaken Indians, penniless refugees, rural workers.'⁷⁸

Full of questions, I decided to visit the Plaza de Armas. It is the historical centre of Santiago and I assumed this was as good a time as any to do a little sightseeing. Optimistically, I believed I would be too busy to visit the plaza's sites later on because the mystical world of Gabriela Mistral would swallow me up.

The Cathedral was massive, almost oppressive; its golden adornments and stained glass ceiling stretched upward. The structure was so large it made you feel insignificant and at the same time, very much alive. My conscience, however, was drawn not to the grandeur but to the beggars outside its gilded doors. Men with bare swollen feet, a tired boy with his dog and a pregnant girl with the biggest brown eyes I have ever seen cried out for help in front of the one place that should be giving it away. I noticed the Cathedral suggested a donation upon entry but instead of dropping my money into the already full box, I gave it to the people who really needed it – the ones dying on the other side.

I walked into the centre of the plaza to watch a man get his shoes shined. He took his seat on a stool, tilted his wool cap forward then opened a very large book. The man reminded me of my father. I stared for a while then looked back to the Cathedral. A performance artist dressed like the devil swayed and howled beneath a jacaranda tree. He crushed petals with his toes pushing a tide of people back into the plaza's market saturated in paintings and poetry. So many contradictions in such a surreal place. *My advice to the visitor is not to question the marvels he hears about my country, its wine and its women, because the foreigner is not allowed to criticise – we have more than 15 million natives who do that all the time... My family is from Santiago, but there are worse places under the sun. I grew up there, but now scarcely recognise it and get lost in its streets. The capital was founded following the classic pattern for Spanish cities: a plaza*

de armas in the centre, from which parallel and perpendicular streets radiated. Of that there is nothing but a bare memory. Santiago has spread out like a demented octopus, extending its eager tentacles in every direction; today five and a half million people live there, surviving however they can. It would be a pretty city, because it's clean, well cared for and filled with gardens, if it didn't sit under a dark sombrero of pollution that in winter-time kills infants in their cradles, old people in nursing homes, and birds in the air.⁷⁹

Chapter Thirty-Two

Neruda and his Ship

Neruda's stubborn expression is the mark of genuine Chilean idiosyncrasy. Our people feel distant from highbrow poetry, and without a doubt, he feels the same artistic repulsion in regard to abstruse flowery language. It is important to recall the sticky-sweet linguistic warehouse of 'nightingales,' 'gauziness' and 'roses' that left us mired in second rate modernismo in order to understand this gust of salty sea air with which Pablo Neruda cleanses his own sky and makes known his desire for clarification, in general.

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'A Message About Pablo Neruda'

Pablo Neruda is famous for his work, of course, and for the way he lived. He loved deeply, lost tragically, fought for his beliefs and was forced into exile because of them. He owned three homes in Chile and upon his death these homes were transformed into museums. One of these abodes, La Chascona, rests in Barrio Bellavista (a province of Santiago), at the base of Cerro San Cristóbal where the zoo, park and a thirty-six meter statue of the Virgin Mary stand.

I took the metro (impressed by its modernity and cleanliness) to Baquedano then walked over the milky River Mapocho and into a residential neighbourhood spun together by jasmine and kumquat trees, all in radiant bloom. The shade and tranquillity of this sleepy part of town soothed me.

Wandering but with direction, I eventually came to a long blue house with white doors and sun sculpture encased windows. La Chascona was named after Neruda's third wife, the singer, Matilde Urrutia whose wild red hair defined her features. Other than that, I knew little about her but presumed I would learn more once I stepped inside.

In the entrance there was a gift shop crowded with Neruda knickknacks – shirts, postcards, books, pens, jewellery, coasters – anything that could have his face on it. I was

informed by a guy stacking Neruda mousepads that I had to pay for a tour to see the rest of the house; going on my own was not an option.

‘Wait here,’ he told me. ‘I’ll get Ivan.’

Ivan, my guide, was a skinny man with multiple sclerosis and a strong knowledge of Neruda. He led me through low rooms, up stairs that curled beneath vibrant arching doorways. It felt like we were on a ship.

‘This is the bar.’ Ivan stood behind it to give me the full effect. Inca artefacts, paintings and crosses decorated the background. Above was a wooden plank and from that hung a seaman’s lantern. The counter of the bar was made of reflective steel. Thick glass tumblers rested on its surface. I could see Neruda pouring himself a whisky and offering me one. I thought about Neruda’s hands holding the bottle.

‘Follow me,’ Ivan broke my concentration. He struggled to make his way into the living room, lost his balance then fell to the floor. I took his arm and helped him up.

‘Are you alright?’

‘Fuck,’ he muttered. ‘I’m fine, thanks.’ He brushed off his knee then held onto the back of a chair for support. ‘This is the living room.’ He introduced it as if it were a person. ‘It’s built like a lighthouse. See the rounded glass? Neruda loved the sea so much that he called himself the captain. What’s strange is that he never actually went out to sea.’

‘Why not?’ I asked.

‘Because he got seasick. Instead he put a rocking chair in this room and filled it with nautical furniture.’

The room was enchanting. Figureheads from the bows of ships held up tabletops. Globes and sea-glass stood protected inside brass cabinets. There were massive clocks, telescopes, Russian dolls, compasses and animal hide rugs that clashed but at the same time complemented each other in the very wooden room. I watched light spray in through the glass. It reflected off a steering wheel in the far corner and I thought of R. He would love a room like this.

‘Come see this painting.’ Ivan encouraged me over to the opposing wall. ‘Diego Rivera painted it. It’s Neruda’s third wife, Matilde Urrutia, but he actually painted the portrait before they were married. It’s unusual because Matilde has two faces: one stares forward, the other stares off to the side. And if you look closely, you can see Neruda in the portrait. He’s outlined in her hair.’ Ivan tried lifting his finger but could not. Instead he pointed with his chin. ‘Matilde and Pablo were having an affair when Rivera painted this. Neruda was still married to his second wife, so instead of giving the secret affair away, Rivera signed the painting “to Rosario and Pablo”. Rosario was Matilde’s middle name.’

Ivan held the glass door to the garden open for me. We walked out into the new leaves and sunlight, over a narrow stone path then up into a room separate from the rest of the house. The only sound you could hear was of birds singing then the floorboards creaking as we stepped inside.

‘This is the library. It’s my favourite room in the house,’ Ivan said. ‘Neruda used discarded wood from ships for the floor. That’s why it moans when you walk across it.’

I looked around. The ceiling was low with dark beams and his collection of books reached around the circumference of room. Again, there was a little bar, however, unlike

the other rooms, this one had a view of the city. Somehow, this view made Santiago look beautiful. I could almost hear Neruda speaking.

*I have marked the atlas of your body
with crosses of fire.
My mouth went across: a spider, trying to hide.
In you, behind you, timid, driven by thirst.*

*Stories to tell you on the shore of evening,
sad and gentle doll, so that you will not be sad.
A swan, a tree, something far away and happy.
The season of grapes, the ripe and fruitful season...*⁸⁰

There was a photograph of a young girl beside the bar. I asked Ivan who she was. 'Neruda's daughter. She was eight when she died from a swollen brain (I would later learn she actually had Downs Syndrome). He never had children after that or recovered from the loss.'

* * *

I left Neruda's house feeling sorry. Sorry for what Neruda's daughter went through, sorry for what Neruda went through, sorry for the debilitating disease that Ivan had to live with. I felt sorry for the Chileans who had to live in Santiago and sorry for the state of the world. I did not know where to go, so I just started walking. The sun fried my skin but I continued until I found myself beneath the Virgin at the top of Cerro San Cristóbal.

There were vendors with souvenirs, women with rosary beads and children smoking cigarettes. Religious music poured from strategically positioned loud speakers. I looked down to the city below me; the pollution, the people and traffic. A mother with a baby approached the Virgin.

'Bless this sick child,' she pleaded. And the music, it just grew louder.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Beatriz Kase

We women do not write only like Buffon, who for the critical moment would adorn herself with a lace-sleeved jacket and sit so very solemnly at her mahogany desk. I write on my knees; the desk-table has never been of any use to me – not in Chile, Paris or Lisbon. I write during the morning or night. The afternoon has never given me any inspiration; I do not understand the reason for its sterility or its lack of desire for me.

– Gabriela Mistral, 'How I Write'

I woke up from a series of bizarre dreams and questions; full of doubt and insecurities. Santiago was having a strange effect on me. I needed something to happen. I needed to make something happen. I rang Beatriz Kase, a contact I had acquired from my professor Willy Maley back in Glasgow, hoping she might be able to point me in a direction. She was pleased to hear from me and told me to meet her at Parque Bustamante at eleven.

'There's a market on today. The Catholic University is hosting it and I've been meaning to go. I think you'll enjoy it. Afterwards, I'll arrange for us to have lunch at my home.' I felt somewhat relieved.

I raced to the *supermercado* for a bottle of Chile's finest Merlot. If I did not hurry, I would be late in meeting Beatriz and I did not want us to get off on the wrong foot.

'You must hand me each item,' the checkout woman said with folded arms. The supermarket was empty and my basket contained one bottle of wine. I took the wine out of the basket and placed it on the moving belt.

'Hand the item to me. I need to scan it.'

The bottle was directly in front of her. It had stopped the belt.

'It goes faster if you *hand* each item to me,' she said with her arms still crossed.

I looked to the bottle then to the checkout woman. Was she kidding? She had to be. I reached for the bottle and placed it in the palm of her hand. She yawned and slowly rolled it across the scanner.

‘See how much faster that was?’

* * *

I took the metro to Parque Bustamante and for the first time noticed that there was a book vending machine beside the platform. What a brilliant idea. I had never seen anything like it before. Stunned by the magnitude of my find, I stepped onto the wrong platform and then the wrong train. What an idiot! A local woman sitting beside me set me straight. Her kind gesture brought me a new-found respect for Santiago’s people.

The market looked busy and I waited for Beatriz beside the entrance. She told me that she would find me. I told her I would be wearing a red scarf. Families and students passed by laughing and talking. Their closeness made me homesick.

Twenty minutes later, Beatriz arrived and she was very different from what I had pictured. She was thin and blonde with a floral short-sleeve blouse and long flowing skirt that touched her ankles. She radiated a motherly type of glow as she took my arm with both of her warm hands.

‘Please forgive me. I’m terribly late,’ she said dabbing her forehead with a handkerchief.

‘No problem,’ I assured her, relieved that she was late instead of me. Because I had not proved to be the most punctual person since my arrival in South America, I thought it must be something in the soil. We passed through the gates of the market together, our feet in parallel stride.

The market felt like a pocket-sized Latin America, boxed and wrapped in eco-friendly paper. There were hats from Ecuador, dolls from Cuba, shawls from Bolivia, wall hangings from Venezuela, maté gourds from Uruguay, hand-carved figures from Peru, coconut jewellery from Brazil and wooden statues from Chile. It made Christmas shopping easy and I would be home for it in less than three weeks' time.

Beatriz introduced me to Carlos, her colleague from the University. He walked with us from stall to stall and explained the various artworks: their colourings, significance in culture and indigenous origins. Carlos was Chilean, not Hungarian/Chilean or Spanish/Chilean but indigenous Chilean. He was very proud of his bloodline, proud of his country and his culture. It was an absolute joy speaking to Carlos whose passion for life, and all its trimmings, was infectious.

Beatriz was also an interesting woman and she gave me clarity about the whole Argentinean/Chilean conflict, which I wanted to understand.

'There is a lot of prejudice towards the Argentines in Chile. For some it goes to the extreme of choosing one country over the other. For example, if you like Argentina, then you cannot like Chile. The Chileans say that the Argentines are Italians who speak Spanish with an English arrogance – meaning they have no identity of their own. It's ridiculous. People who think like that are simply jealous.'

Beatriz carefully lifted a small wooden statue of the Virgin Mary. She spoke with the artist who made it and I wandered off to consider something I had yet to think about: the Chilean identity. I first pondered over Mexico and how, when Mexico springs to mind, so do the Mariachi bands, tacos and sombreros. And when I consider Argentina, I see maté, gauchos and tango. If I consider Cuba, I picture coffee, communism and

Castro. The lists for all central and South American countries go on and on but when I come to Chile, there is no list. What is Chile? What is the Chilean identity? Even in this market, the Chilean stand blends into all of those surrounding it. It does not have a national dress, music, food or dance to call its own.

*Let's dance on the land of Chile,
lovely as Rachel, as Leah,
the land that breeds a people
sweet of heart and speech...*

*Tomorrow we'll hew and quarry,
tend to the trees and plants,
tomorrow we'll build the cities,
today just let us dance!⁸¹*

We waved goodbye to Carlos and walked to her car. Beatriz put on driving gloves before starting the engine. I had never seen anyone do that before. Perhaps *this* is a Chilean thing?

Flor, Beatriz's Peruvian maid, welcomed us into the flat. She was lovely and had a smile that instantly warmed you. She so much reminded me of Edith and I wondered about her background, how she came to Chile and if her working conditions were any better than Edith's had been. I wished she would join us for lunch but knew that would be out of the question. Flor took the bottle of wine I brought into the kitchen, then carried my bag into a back room.

The flat was spacious with polished floors and white walls. Nothing was out of place, especially on the dining table set for three. Flor had been busy preparing a vegetarian lunch of rice, courgettes, eggplant, onions, tomatoes with cheese and fresh bread. It was to be a formal affair with Chardonnay and desert. I sat down across from Beatriz and beside her elderly father. I was starving.

‘I did not leave home because I’m so comfortable here. I never felt the need to leave.’ Beatriz spoke as she touched her father’s hand. I understood her choices but wondered if she ever missed being independent from her family. The idea of living with one’s parents until middle age would terrify most western women but perhaps it is different in South America? In this household it obviously was.

After lunch we walked on to the balcony. Beatriz showed me her potted lavender. ‘I grow two kinds – French and English. I spray them with vinegar to keep the bugs away. Now, let’s retire to the study.’

The study was small, full of photographs and books.

‘You’re studying Victoria Ocampo. Is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well then, here – take this.’ She handed me a book on *Sur* by Oscar Hermes Villordo. ‘The author is spineless and has no opinion. He only writes about *Sur*’s upper class status because he felt inferior to it coming from a middle class background.’

She did a poor job selling the book to me but I was appreciative of her gift.

‘Alfonsina. She’s another one of your subjects.’

‘That’s correct. And Gabriela Mistral.’

‘Well, these women writers are not in my expertise. Ask me about Jane Austen and I could tell you all kinds of interesting things, but Alfonsina – she made some shocking life choices.’

It was then that I realised I should not have mentioned Alfonsina to Beatriz.

‘Having a child out of wedlock is unfair to the child,’ she insisted. ‘But I suppose it was better than killing it – than having an abortion I mean.’

I bit my tongue hard. Discussing a woman's right to choose would not be appropriate in this setting. All I would do was upset my host.

'It is nice of Alejandro to paint his mother in a respectable light. It's good he is not ashamed of her,' Beatriz said looking out to the lavender.

Our conversation never managed Gabriela. Perhaps the lesbian Mother of Chile was not one of Beatriz's favourite topics of conversation? Besides, we had spent a full, enjoyable day together and it was getting late. The last thing I wanted to do was impose, so I rose to thank her.

'But we have not yet had afternoon tea.'

Almost instantly, Flor arrived with a tray of assorted cakes and biscuits as well as a pot full of Lady Grey tea.

'Christmas in Chile is very different from Christmas in England. The 25th of December is the middle of our summer. Sometimes I try to have a proper English Christmas with Yorkshire pudding and roast potatoes but it's too hot and I always return to cooler foods. Of course our milk in Chile is powdered, which makes trifles and sauces nearly impossible.'

I nodded, thinking about the Christmas I was going to have in San Francisco. I could see the fog rolling in over Mount Tamalpais then lifting to unveil crisp clear skies. I looked forward to my family sitting around the fireplace and my father reading a chosen Christmas story, the embers of the fire crackling behind his hot glass of brandy. I asked Beatriz if there was anything in particular she read during Christmas.

'Oh yes, Susan Cooper and Jane Austen.'

I tried to imagine Beatriz's Christmas – her father and her sitting beneath a tree. Would Flor join them or did she get the day off? I could see the Chilean sky, sharp with sunlight, and the dining room table covered in a variety of bright cold salads.

* * *

When I got back to the hostel, Simon (the owner) had started the barbecue. Chicken and fish grilled over hissing coals. Several women travellers, with cigarettes hanging from their lips, sliced cabbage and carrots in the kitchen. They were in charge of the coleslaw. There was a large bowl of dangerous looking punch on the table.

'Take a glass,' Simon called out. Kym and Gary, an English couple I'd met the previous day, had saved me a seat at their table. A German band was in the process of setting their gear up in the corner of the courtyard. It was such an amiable scene and I wondered what Christmas would be like in La Casa Roja. Would there be Yorkshire pudding and trifle? Or would it be like a Thursday night barbecue, only with presents and a little more alcohol?

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Dead

*The bones of the dead are tender ice
that know how to crumble
and become dust on the lips
of the ones who loved them.
And these live lips can no longer kiss.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'The Bones of the Dead'

Parque por la Paz was a place I did not necessarily want to visit but had to see. It had nothing to do with Gabriela, nothing to do with women writers but everything to do with Chile.

I took a disco-decorated bus to the outskirts of the city where cracked earth reached across deserted pavements and driveways. All homes in this unusually quiet area mirrored each other's flatness, structure and bone-white shade. Across from where the bus left me was a gate and behind the gate, a small park. I pushed the gate aside, crossed the brown lawn and entered a world full of ghosts. El Parque por la Paz (Park for Peace) is a memorial park today but it used to be the main detention and torture centre for the notorious DINA (Directoria de Inteligencia Nacional), a brutal fist in General Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship that ruled Chile from 1973 to 1989.

The dark and bloody history of Chile during these sixteen years continues to haunt its people. The terror began on the 11th of September 1973 when Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende's government in a coup d'état (with the financial and political backing of the USA) leaving Allende dead and Chile in terror. Tens of thousands were kidnapped, tortured and executed. Hundreds of thousands sought exile.

‘Hundreds of less prominent leftists were also transferred to remote military camps, where treatment ranged from humane to subhuman. At the northern desert camp of Pisagua, detainees were forced to crawl and lick the ground in front of military officials. And at Quiriquina Island, a navy training camp in Concepción harbour, they were made to run naked until they dropped and to endure elaborately staged, mock executions.’⁸²

This chapter of horror has certainly not come to an end, perhaps a reason why the Chileans I have met so far do not bring it up in political discussions? ‘There are those who do not want to relive the horror, and those who choose to remain indifferent, and those who choose to forget,’ Pilar Aguilera and Ricardo Fredes write in *Chile: the Other September 11*. So is this why there are no Madres marching, no major art displays or city centre museums dedicated to this wide-open wound?

Pinochet was arrested in 1998 but he has yet to stand trial and there are serious doubts he ever will.* Many of the families whose loved ones disappeared during his bloodbath of power have not seen justice.

I traced the edges of the compound with my finger, looking up to a wall with a list of names. Each name, a person; each person, a death that should never have been. Beside the wall was a wooden board that read:

Park for Peace
Villa Grimaldi
Clandestine Detention Centre of Torture
and Disappearance that functioned between 1973 and 1978

4,000 tortures
208 disappearances

* At the end of 2004, the Supreme Court ordered Pinochet to stand trial. Because of his age and ill health, in addition to the lengthy legal battle that lies ahead, many Chileans believe he will die before the case actually goes to court. The news (however late) is a positive beginning to an end that has dragged on for too long.

18 executions
Help us construct a museum of memory

Beside my foot lay a plaque marking one of the spots of torture. These plaques were scattered all over the park. To the right of me was the swimming pool used in electrocutions. Even though most of the detention centre had been demolished by the military towards the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, you could not ignore the melancholy sewn tight through the air, the voices crying out.

*It is necessary to judge those hands stained
 by the dead he killed with his terror;
 the dead from under the earth
 are rising up like seeds of sorrow.*

*Because this is a time never before dreamed of.
 And Nixon, the trapped rat,
 his eyes wide with fear,
 is watching the rebirth of flags shot down.*

*He was defeated every day in Vietnam.
 In Cuba his rage was driven away
 and now in the buried twilight
 this rodent is gnawing at Chile
 not knowing that Chileans of little importance
 are going to give him a lesson in honour.⁸³*

Chapter Thirty-Five

Finding Gabriela

*Sleep, sleep, my beloved,
without worry, without fear,
although my soul does not sleep,
although I do not rest.*

*Sleep, sleep, and in the night
may your whispers be softer
than a leaf of grass,
or the silken fleece of lambs.*

*May my flesh slumber in you,
my worry, my trembling.
In you, may my eyes close
and my heart sleep.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'The Sad Mother'

I woke up to what I thought was an earthquake. The French doors of my room rattled uncontrollably. They seemed ready to burst open. The night before I had read about an earthquake that hit Santiago in 1647. It killed ten percent of the population. Was this the next big one? I jumped out of bed and flew to the doorframe. Frantically, I tried to remember everything I had been taught in earthquake drills at school but those tips are difficult to recall in the middle of the night in a place that looks nothing like your old classroom. With my arms braced tightly against the frame I waited for the ceiling to cave in. I waited for the light fixture to sway and the floor to move. Nothing happened. The only thing that moved were the French doors and I began to realise that the reason they shook was not because of Mother Nature, it was because there were two travellers having sex on the other side of them. I walked back to bed as loudly as I could; stomping and talking to myself, hoping they might hear me and move to a tree or at least somewhere

else. Unfortunately they did not hear me and I spent what felt like hours with a pillow wrapped tight around my ears.

* * *

In need of books, I went out into Santiago exploring an area known for used bookshops, a nest of knowledge not far from Manuel Montt metro station. Unfortunately, most of them had closed for an indefinite period but I did manage to find one still open.

‘We don’t have anything on Gabriela,’ the woman behind the desk winked. ‘But there is a woman’s bookshop, Librería Lila. They will stock books by Gabriela.’ She drew a map on the back of a bookmark. ‘This will help you find your way.’

Librería Lila was situated in an oasis of trees and hippie shops selling crystals and incense. Off the main road, this alcove of tranquillity embraced me with wide-open arms. The shade relaxed me to a point where I started to think that Santiago was actually a nice city after all.

I was the only person in Librería Lila, aside from the woman behind the counter. She was tiny, with short dark hair and a long strand of beads around her neck. I asked her if she had anything on Gabriela.

‘Gabriela?’ She looked me up and down then told me instead about Santiago’s lesbian venues.

‘Thank you,’ I said cutting her off. I did not want to insult her but I needed information on Gabriela, not night clubs, whatever my appearance might have suggested. ‘I’m sorry but I’m running out of options and need your help. I have very few contacts in Chile and was wondering if you might be able to point me in the right direction. You see, I’m trying to find out about Gabriela Mistral’s life.’

‘Okay, okay. But just so you know, I’m not one of Gabriela’s biggest fans. She is so sensationalised that she has turned into a myth. You’ll be stretched to find anything real in Santiago. Get out of the city friend. Go north.’

* * *

Before planning my trip up north, I visited the Biblioteca Nacional. If any place could assist me, this was it. I stood in awe before it; a building of epic design and proportion, touched by graffiti but magnificent nonetheless. I strolled in casually, expecting to be frisked.

‘Please check your bag in over there,’ a guard asked gently.

I nodded, checked it in behind a counter then walked through the building. There were few guards, no limit to the amount of books you borrowed, no restrictions on where to go and no queues. I thought back to my library experience in Buenos Aires. In comparison, there was a real sense of freedom here and I relished it. My adventure entailed sticking my head into several small reading rooms. There were so many books, I could have spent the rest of my trip quite happy reading in between the library’s walls. But when I barged into a room with two inquisitive men hard at work, I realised I had crossed the line from public to private space. They stood over a table, armed with magnifying glasses. Beneath them was a dried plant.

‘I’m terribly sorry to intrude. Please forgive me. The library is so big. I must be lost.’ I began closing the door.

‘Come in, come in!’ They invited with great enthusiasm. ‘What can we help you with?’

‘I’m looking for the room – ’

‘You are English?’ The bald man asked, in English.

‘I live in Scotland.’

‘Ah – Scotland. I spent seven years exiled in London.’ He held out his hand to mine.

‘Yes, me too and I haven’t spoken English in seventeen years! It is wonderful to speak English again.’ The other man sang his sentences merrily. ‘Now, what do you need help with?’

‘I understand there is a photography gallery here?’

‘Yes, that is correct.’ The bald man rubbed his head. ‘I’ll show you the way.’

He took me by the arm and walked me down the long corridor. Our shoes echoed against the marble floor.

‘Here you are.’ He held the door open for me. The room was full of smoke and ashtrays.

‘Enjoy, señorita,’ he said as he kissed my cheeks. ‘Such a pleasure to meet you.’

A young woman with apricot lips sucked in the last of her cigarette before asking, ‘Yes?’

‘I’m looking for photographs of Gabriela Mistral.’

‘Of course – Gabriela. We have many. Come this way.’

She took out several disks and told me I could copy them as long as I mentioned their origin. I spent hours looking through hundreds of photographs of Mistral. Visually her life was well documented, in various stages, from youth until her untimely death. The photos showed her in rural Chile with schoolchildren. She stood beneath trees, beside windows, in half-light and in full. In most she poses as her male counterparts do; without

a hat, her arms crossed, her dress shapeless, dark and unflattering. She does not wear make-up nor does she fix her hair according to the times. Instead, she smokes contentedly beside friends.

*Under your gaze I will turn beautiful
as the dew-bowed grass.*

*And when I go down to the river
the high reeds won't know my shining face.*

*I am ashamed of my sad mouth,
my harsh voice, my rough knees.*

*When you looked at me and came to me
I knew myself poor, felt myself naked.⁸⁴*

After my experience in the photography gallery, I discovered a room stacked high with newspaper clippings. Cardboard cases lay on high shelves that stretched around a bustling space full of classical music and conversation. The windows were as large as the tables beneath them, thronged with people both young and old. It was in this room that I spent a majority of my time; three full days reading everything I could get my hands on.

What I learned over the course of this time was that before Mistral's death, she had admitted to her lover, Doris Dana, that her adopted nephew Juan Miguel or as she affectionately called him, 'Yin-Yin', was indeed her biological son (something that can put to rest all the rumours). I also read how she had blamed Yin-Yin's suicide on some of the local black Brazilian children in the area. She professed that her darling child was simply 'too white for his own good'. Coming from a woman who was supposed to be the defender of indigenous peoples, these are very harsh words. But when I later read how, after writing about herself being mixed race – indigenous, Spanish and Jewish – behind closed doors she considered herself first and foremost white, I was shocked. The only

thing I could take away from all of this reading was that Mistral was the greatest of image-makers.

Mistral's preoccupation with travel is also interesting. Her travels began through her role as teacher, in various villages throughout Chile. Then in June 1922, she left Chile for Mexico with an invitation from the Mexican Government to collaborate with their educational reform. There, she received a heroine's welcome. Shortly after Mexico, she went to the United States where she was celebrated by the Pan American Union in Washington for her humanitarian efforts. This would be the first of numerous awards, honours and titles bestowed upon her through her lifetime. She also wrote articles for the magazine *Nueva Democracia* of New York, namely on the relationship between the United States and South America. After this, her life never returned to the simplicity she had known back in Chile because her role as rural teacher fell into the shadows of her literary and diplomatic career – one she coveted, without a doubt.

From the United States, she went to Europe where her second collection of poetry, *Ternura (Tenderness)* was published in Spain. She was greeted enthusiastically wherever she went; her status grew to a phenomenal level peaking when she received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945.

Gabriela Mistral was born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga on the same day as Victoria Ocampo, the 7th of April, only one year earlier, in 1889. Mistral grew up poor in Chile's rural Elqui Valley. Her father was a poetic wanderer who abandoned his family when Mistral was three years old, leaving her to grow up with her mother and half sister, the primary source of both her livelihood and education.

The relationship Mistral shared with nature, the inspiration of much of her writing, began from the moment she could crawl. Mistral was also a young rebel who confessed later on in life, *that if I could have chosen my vocation again I would rather have been a scientist than a poet* because of her interest in plants and animals. She was also deeply connected to her village, of which she said, *When I was a stable child of my race and country, I wrote about what I saw or what I possessed with immediacy; the warm flesh of the subject matter...*⁸⁵

Mistral was an avid reader and published writer from a young age but had to work to support herself. She became a schoolteacher and due to Mistral's wit (some even argue masculinity), she rose quickly through the ranks to occupy various top teaching posts. Mistral's tenacity carried her farther than any other Chilean woman to date.

At the age of twenty, Mistral lost her friend, or as some suggest 'lover', a railroad worker named Romelio Ureta. His shocking suicide inspired her famous *Los sonetos de la muerte (Sonnets on Death)* where she wrote,

*Men pass by. They pass with mouths expressing
a happy and forever renewed song
that now is lusty, and tomorrow, crazy,
and later, mystical. I chose this invariable
song with which I lull to sleep a dead man
who was distant from all reality, and in all dreams, mine:
he who enjoyed other lips, and rested upon another woman's
breast...*⁸⁶

Sonnets of Death launched her career as a poet; a subject that continued to haunt her throughout her life for in 1943 her adopted 'nephew', Juan Miguel Godoy, also committed suicide. His death nearly destroyed her.

I wanted to explore the background of Mistral's nephew, a somewhat forbidden secret that remains in the darkness of most Mistral discussions. Was Juan Miguel Godoy really her nephew or her illegitimate child? When I posed the question to Monica Ottino, she kept to that strange oath of silence, acknowledging my question, then dismissing it. Instead we reviewed Mistral's poetry. Monica accepted it was good but felt it was not worthy of the Nobel Prize, especially in the monumental year of 1945.

'Gabriela loved being received as a hero.' Monica had said with a hint of sarcasm. 'And I don't think a good poet, not a great poet, would receive the Nobel Prize if she wasn't very clever.'

In the course of our discussion, Monica mentioned a man I had never heard of before, Stephen Spike, a distinguished German intellectual and good friend to Gabriela. Like Gabriela, he was an outsider. He was also Jewish and in 1942 both he and his wife committed suicide because they wanted to take their own lives before Hitler could find them. Their suicides occurred one year before Juan Miguel Godoy's suicide. Was Godoy inspired by the Spikes to take his own life? Like Stephen Spike, Godoy felt tortured by the world around him. He was regularly teased by his peers and burdened by following Gabriela to various international locations. Was such an international lifestyle too much for the 'adoptive' child of Gabriela? If so, why had Gabriela, Chile's model mother figure, not seen what was happening?

When she returned to Chile from Europe in 1925, she was showered with praise then granted a pension for her work as a teacher as well as an honorary diploma from the University of Chile. This enabled her, for the first time, to travel and work without any economic constraints. The Chilean Government also appointed her as its representative in

the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, and so she travelled once again to Europe where she lived and worked until 1938. While there, she wrote essays about writers and artists she had met, most of whom were published in Chile's leading newspaper, *El Mercurio*.

Later, when she returned to the United States, she gave a series of lectures at Barnard College, Columbia University, Vassar, Middlebury College and the University of Puerto Rico. She was appointed by the Council of the League of Nations and travelled to Spain to attend the international Conference of University of Women in Madrid, as a delegate from Chile and Ecuador. Mistral was Chile's international ambassador, the face of the nation, an unthreatening image to give the outside world, regardless of the choices she made in her personal life or the brutalities committed by the Chilean Government.

I chewed over all of this information and upon leaving the library, a little old woman asked me if I would help her cross the street.

'I've seen you reading,' she explained with a smile full of gums and goo. 'That's how I know to trust you. You are interested in Gabriela?'

'Yes, señora.'

'That's good.'

And as she grabbed my arm, I led her to the other side of O'Higgins realising that maybe Santiago had not lived up to my expectations but it had already taught me a lot. Finally, I was glad I had come but now, it was time for me to go north.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Gateway

*The land most green with orchards,
the land most blond with grain,
the land most red with grapevines,
how sweetly it brushes our feet!*

*Its dust moulded our cheeks,
its rivers, our laughter,
and it kisses our feet with a melody
that makes any mother sigh.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'Chilean Earth'

La Serena was my gateway to the north. The bus left mid-morning and its rosy-cheeked driver promised we would get there before dark.

'Don't worry señorita, the ride is beautiful,' he said, taking my ticket and tearing it in two.

We left Santiago behind in a cloud of fumes. I stared out of my window as the suburbs flew by. Small women peeled corn and barefoot children chased dogs. Old men waved at the bus with their cigarettes flashing bright as fireflies in what quickly became the hazy distance.

It did not take long for us to reach the countryside and when we did, the yellow earth, covered in cacti, embraced me. So small against the voluptuous mountains, apple crops and vineyards, I knew this was the Chile I longed for, the place that Gabriela wrote of and loved. *Small towns possess humility – it is a natural characteristic. They are not caught up in lust for domination. Small towns are places where no one owns too much; therefore, in none of them does materialism become a dominant force.*⁸⁷

A jagged coastline separates the Pacific from La Serena and because the city does not sit on a fault line, its buildings and colonial flavour have survived the test of time. You can see this in the way the road shifts, the way the city's silhouette reclines against the horizon and the pure simplicity of daily life. It took us seven hours to get to La Serena and somewhere between the middle and the end of the journey I got lost. The low-lying fog, burnished sand and windswept vegetation made me question if I was in Chile or California. The scenery was exactly the same and aside from a few road signs, the differences were impossible to pick out until we arrived at the bus station. There the usual madness greeted me, only this time I felt prepared because Chile had settled into my blood. It had melted my accent to the point where I could blend in quite easily. Unlike before, no one even attempted to drag me off the bus or lure me into a taxi. This time, I was left with the other locals to find my own way.

With my backpack and palm-sized map, I ventured down the city streets. Like roots, they reached up to the mountainside and down to the beach below. A giant crucifix, mirroring the famed one of Rio, stood tall above the city, iridescent against the serious black clouds rolling in. I saw very few tourists and the longer I walked, the fewer there were. But I pressed on through the one-storey city; its low doorframes, open-air bars and grandmothers forever collecting laundry. A fresh wind roared up off the ocean then down the length of my neck. It pushed the fog deeper inland. I buttoned my jacket wishing I had brought something warmer to wear.

Against my better judgement, I decided to use the *Lonely Planet* to find accommodation (I do not think I will ever learn). I closed my eyes and let my blind finger choose the Hostel de Turismo Croata. A 'highly regarded' establishment the *LP* raved.

Those words alone should have set all alarm bells off but the bus ride from Santiago had exhausted me. All I wanted was a clean bed for the night. My standards were pretty low. Not as low as the Hostel de Turismo Croata set, I quickly found, but it would do. My only concern was over the neighbouring shops that sold live chickens and pornography. Would I get any sleep? I went inside anyway because by that point, I was too tired to walk anywhere else.

The receptionist was cheery, which immediately changed my mood from sceptical to hopeful. I asked for a room and she led me to one with such dignity that I could not help but feel something for it. A lot of love had gone into this place that had, if nothing else, its very own personality.

I dumped my things on the buoyant bed then walked the length of town. The distance was manageable and the climate demanded attention. I had not felt weather like this since Glasgow and knew the one thing I needed was a hat. My timing was impeccable. I passed an artisan's market just as I thought my ears would fall off. My hands passed over ashtrays, cups, earrings and wallets until I found a wool hat.

'I'll take it,' I told the woman with two long black braids. She was short, round and dark. Her tiny hands were scraped and scared. She lifted the edges of her lips without showing me her teeth.

'This design is my favourite,' she said, looking down at it almost lovingly. 'It has been in the family for a long time.' She held the hat in her hands, feeling it delicately. 'A bag?'

'No thank you. I'm going to wear it now.' My nose had gone blue.

I paid the price she asked then quickly pulled the hat down to my ears. It was so soft and warm. The wind let out an angry howl. I walked faster until I found myself in a plaza enclosed by sweet smelling stalls. Housewives sold honey cakes, bricks of chocolate and chunky marmalade that gave you no choice but to lick your lips. In the centre of the plaza, old men played chess beneath great trumpet trees. Interested in a game, I asked a man in green. He looked up and with topaz eyes told me to sit down. Our game lasted exactly fifteen moves before he had me in checkmate.

The weather got worse. The cold and the wet went straight through me. To get my mind off it, I thought about Gabriela. I thought back to when, in 1901, Gabriela and her family moved to La Serena and it was here that she first saw the sea; an image that would forever remain with her and her work. Her mother, sister and self moved to there because Isabel de Villanueva, Gabriela's Argentine grandmother, called the town home. Isabel was old and her sight was poor, so she relied on the young Gabriela to read passages from her bible on Sundays (a book which no other woman in all of La Serena owned; a book which caused everyone to think Isabel was indeed Jewish). This somewhat ridiculous assumption would later lead Gabriela to say she had Jewish blood in her veins.⁸⁸

Gabriela's writing career began at age eleven, when she started to write and publish her work in *El Coquimbo* of La Serena and *La Voz de Elqui*, edited in Vicuña. She left school at fourteen and applied for the Normal School (Teacher's College) of La Serena but was refused entry. This, however, did not stop her from teaching. She took a position as clerk in the Public High School of La Serena (an upper-class school) then began carving her path from there – one that parted easily.⁸⁹

I crossed the street and on the corner a child, with the voice of a symphony, stood singing. His mother, manager or both (I could not decide) stood protectively beside him and every coin dropped into his Yankees baseball cap went directly into her pocket. A crowd quickly formed around this boy who was at best, eight years old. Although his t-shirt was stained and his unruly hair extremely matted, he had the presence of a legend coupled with a very old soul. I wondered if some day, he might achieve the same success as Gabriela. Could he, like her, find his own international stage?

After exhausting the streets of La Serena, I ended up in a café just off the main road. I sat beside the window with a glass of Merlot reading Gabriela's poetry. I imagined her sitting across from me, rolling a fresh cigarette, sipping from a glass full of scotch, telling me a story then ordering something vegetarian off the menu. I suppose this little game made me feel less alone.

'I'll have the same as Gabriela,' I'd tell the waiter.

And he'd lean over to whisper to me, 'They all do.'

Star, I'm all alone.

*Tell my soul if there are
any others like her.*

*'Yes,' says the star.
Look how I'm crying.*

*What woman ever wore
such a cloak of tears?*

*'One weeps more.'*⁹⁰

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Vicuña

*Dear Mother, in a dream
I cross livid landscapes,
a black mountain that always
twists to reach the other mountain,
where you continue to remain vaguely,
but there always is another round mountain
to encompass, to pay the passage
to the mountain of your pleasure,
of my pleasure.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'The Escape'

I felt peace in this part of the country. I had finally found the Chilean path I had hoped to find and did not want to look back to Santiago. Although alone and sometimes lonely, it was refreshing to be totally on my own again. Out here, I was far away from city life, acquaintances and connections. There were no busy cafés or theatres, no locutorios or metros to get comfortably lost in. There were only the local people, earth, sun, wind, sky, stars and somewhere dotted on the hazy landscape – me. I have never really thought about my own rebirth before but if it were to happen, I would want it to feel like just like this. I would want it to feel this free, uncomplicated, complete.

The ride to Vicuña made me appreciate nature all over again. Mountains rolled into each other ripe with papayas and heavy purple grapes. A turquoise lake shimmered in the distance. The River Elqui rushed, roared and ran into itself – into its own consistent greyness.

It took me about a second to realise that time does not exist out here. Barely into our journey, the driver pulled over to the side of the road. A large fruit and vegetable

market had just opened and the driver decided he needed something from it. Without any explanation, he turned off the engine and flung open the door. On his way out, he brushed against a portrait of Jesus hanging from the rear view mirror. It swayed like a metronome until his return.

Dirt roads led us to Vicuña, a town very different from any I have experienced so far. Tucked into the edge of the world, this quiet village has seen little change over the decades. Dry streets and even drier hills create a sense of exhaustion; palm trees look thirsty, shrubs hover close to the ground. Most of the homes are square one-room adobes painted brightly with narrow doors and windows. Their owners linger in front of them, watching their world pass by. In the centre of it all is the Plaza de Armas where old men and bicycles rest inside rare puddles of shade. There is little movement and even less conversation. The only sound comes from radios blaring out of a few scattered restaurants.

I decided to stay in a hostel on Gabriela Mistral Street. Why come all this way and not? The Hostal Valle Hermoso was a lovely old place. The owner was pleased to see me, incredibly friendly, and ushered me in to a small room in the back. Was I the only guest? It was quiet enough for me to hear my eyes blink. I have never heard that sound before.

Not far from the hostel was the Gabriela Mistral Museum – the first place on my list. After unpacking my bag, I made my way there.

‘Hello,’ an old man called out from his window.

‘Hello,’ I waved back.

A little girl ran towards me followed by a litter of kittens. 'Where are you from?' she asked taking my hand in hers. 'Do you want to play with my kittens?'

We sat beside a cart stacked with buckets and wood. She told me the names of her kittens – Apple, Grape, Orange, Banana – then brought out a ball of string.

'Are you here for the stars or Gabriela?' she said swishing the string in the dirt like a snake.

'Both I suppose but mainly Gabriela. Do you know about Gabriela?'

'A little. We have to learn about her in school but I like the stars more. We have a big telescope in Vicuña. It's on the other side of the hill. People come from far away to look through it.' She pointed with the piece of string and all of the kittens leapt in the air. The little girl and I laughed when they came crashing down on top of each other.

'Cecilia – lunch!' The girl's mother called out from her open window.

'Bye Cecilia.'

'Bye.' She squeezed my hand and ran back to her house with the kittens close behind.

* * *

The Gabriela Mistral Museum was once the home of Gabriela, her mother and sister. By the time I arrived, it had opened for the afternoon and a hot wind blew gently across the valley. Her house stood off to the right of the museum, beneath a large pepper tree. It was a simple adobe structure with a rusty tin roof and modest furniture; a fireplace, harp, single bed and dusty chest. It reminded me of those replica villages you see in southern Ireland that try to recreate the past through a modern tainted fiction. Would her family

really own a harp? Would the tiny bed be covered in finely woven lace? It all looked nice though, frozen in this place in time.

A bus heaving with tourists stopped outside. Passengers with baseball caps announcing their last holiday disembarked in pairs, eager to get a glimpse of ‘Mistral Magic’. I watched them fiddle with lens caps and bum bags, moving towards the house collectively. Realising this was my subtle cue, I left and made my way towards the museum.

The lawn between both structures was yellow. It snapped beneath my feet. The museum was much larger than the house – newly-built, very smooth, white and airy. It was a real tribute to Mistral, so much so that I felt I had crawled into her skin. Statues, photographs, audio recordings and letters filled glass cases arranged in tight fitting rows throughout the room. Mistral’s cool voice echoed over speakers, pushing all other sound outdoors. I touched marble sculptures, stared at photographs, read unpublished poems, even the contents of her will. It was as if I had travelled into the consciousness of a dead woman brought back to life through a room crowded by her things and self.

*Little child who appeared,
who didn’t come and yet is here,
I’ll tell you everything we have:
you take what you want to save.⁹¹*

‘Can I help you?’ a man in pressed khaki made me spin around on the heels of my flip-flops.

‘I’m looking for information on Gabriela.’

‘Well, you’ve certainly come to the right place,’ he let out a little chuckle.

‘Follow me.’

We walked towards the gift shop and I knew what was coming next.

‘You can buy anything on Gabriela. Her voice – here, this CD is of her and Neruda reading their poetry. You cannot buy this anywhere else.’

He handed me a burnt copy of the CD. On the top it read in black felt tip marker, *Mistral y Neruda*.

‘I’ll take it – thanks,’ I told him cautiously. ‘Could you tell me a little about Mistral?’

‘Of course. What would you like to know?’

‘Well, why do *you* feel connected to her?’

‘Connected? Señorita, this is a job. Do you know how many jobs there are in Vicuña?’

‘Few?’

‘Very few. Food and money are my connections to Gabriela. I have a family too, you know. Of course her poetry is nice but this is a job to me – why don’t you take this? It’s an interesting book and should give you some answers.’ He handed me a thin biography, *Gabriela Mistral Intima*. ‘It’s yours. I’ve got so many copies, they just sit on the shelf fading in the sun.’

After leaving the museum, my arms full, I crossed over the street and stood in the shade beside an artisan’s house. There was a painted sign telling me to enter. I felt like Alice in Wonderland. With my head bent over, I managed to squeeze through the front door. The space was cramped but well lit. Wooden statues, rain sticks and masks hung from the ceiling. A young woman sat beside the back door looking out towards a garden; her brown hair long against the length of her back. She turned around to welcome me with lapis lazuli eyes.

‘Would you like some tea?’

‘Thank you.’

‘I’m Tanya.’ She took my hand.

‘Fiona.’

Tanya poured a deep red tea into two small cups. ‘Have you just come from the museum?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did you think?’

‘It’s very full.’

‘Yes, almost too much to take in. Gabriela represents the face of this country. She is everywhere, especially in Vicuña. You get used to it after a while.’

‘Has anyone tried to take Gabriela’s place?’

‘No, no one possibly could but there is an old man, maybe sixty, maybe older, who teaches children of the Elqui Valley to write. He is a writer himself and gives the children great inspiration. He gives all of us inspiration.’

‘Do you write, Tanya?’

‘Of course! Everyone who is able to write, writes in Vicuña. It’s the only way to understand the landscape, to understand yourself. People write more here than in Santiago because there are fewer distractions and more inspiration.’

‘Have you lived in Santiago?’

‘I have lived all over Chile – in Santiago, even the south. The people change, you know, they change from place to place. They are inside of themselves, they are greedy in the cities because they are too busy. Here, even in the south, people have a lot of time –

so they talk. They talk about everything. You know, if it's raining in the south strangers will take you into their home. They will give you food and a bed for the night. In the north, they will do the same but make you pay for it. Southern Chile is incredible. Have you been?'

'No, I'm saving it for next time.'

'Good, because it is a gift. It is green and wet unlike the north. Santiago, well, it is a whole different story – a crazy, dirty place.'

'It's not one of my favourite cities either,' I had to admit.

'In Santiago I was distracted and couldn't write but here I must write, like I must breathe, eat and sleep. I must also make my artwork because if I don't, then I feel I will die. This kind of passion I did not know in Santiago. It must have something to do with the environment. The environment is very important to me.'

'Pardon me señorita. Do you have any aloe vera leaves?' One of the tourists from the bus stood in the doorway. He was Chilean or maybe Venezuelan. It was hard to tell. He looked uncomfortable as he took off his cap to pass through the door. 'I have an ulcer.' He said with a clenched fist over his stomach.

'Yes.' Tanya rose to help him. Was she a medicine woman too? 'Just a moment. Sit down and I'll get some for you.' She gave him her seat then went into the garden, quickly returning with three weeping stocks.

'I'll cut the thorns and the skin off for you.' She held a machete in one hand, the aloe vera leaves in the other. 'If you mix the plant with warm water and honey, it tastes better.'

She sliced the leaf into small pieces with the machete, slid the pieces into a mug then spooned in some honey. She boiled more hot water, pouring it carefully over the leaves.

‘Drink this,’ she told him.

The tourist smiled, took the glass and drank the potion down in a series of strained gulps.

‘Already the pain is gone. Thank you. How much do I owe you?’

‘Nothing señor. Aloe vera is nature’s gift. It heals everything – cancer, sore feet, ulcers and sunburns. It is a magical plant. How can I put a price on magic?’

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Falling Stars

*Throw your head back, child,
and receive the stars.
At first sight,
they all sting and chill you,
and then the sky rocks
like a cradle that they balance,
and at a loss, you give up,
like something carried away and away.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'Heaven's Carriage'

I bought a strawberry juice from the neighbourhood juice bar and drank it in the serene pace of the Plaza de Armas. It was mid-morning, the sun was high and scores of school children crossed through the plaza.

'Good morning,' they called out in various pitched voices.

'Vicuña's strawberry juice is the best in the world.' A little boy ran towards me.

'My papa picks strawberries from the field over there.' He looked over the ridge of a near-by mountain. 'He picked the strawberries you're drinking right now.'

'Tell him they are delicious.'

'I will,' the boy quickly kissed my cheek and ran back to his friends.

The little boy made me broody for my own children. It is a feeling that comes in waves, waves that get large and stronger with each passing year. I contemplated motherhood as I looked up to the statue of Gabriela. Her stony glare almost burnt a hole in the sky. She was everywhere – on each Elqui Valley bus, in every plaza, city mural, peso note. She is truly Chile's saviour, saint and queen. But why her? Was she the safest, most unthreatening mascot for Chile? Was it because she was the first Latin American to

win the Nobel prize? Neruda, like Mistral, won the same prize but his face has been nearly obliterated from the public sphere (existing only in the private one). Perhaps it all filters down to politics? Neruda was political. Gabriela was not. By putting Gabriela forward as the face of Chile, the government was able to pacify its international image (even at times of turmoil) through Gabriela's maternal femininity but at the same time, it did so, with a masculine edge.

I ate lunch inside an empty thatched-roof restaurant. A waiter walked from table to table, adding water to vases crammed with plastic roses. *Stayin' Alive*, howled through a speaker above me; a woman pruned ivy creeping up the adjacent garden fence. I spooned butter bean and corn soup into my mouth, breaking the salsa-topped bread with my teeth. The accompanying beer quenched all immediate anxieties. I was so far away from everything I knew and for the first time, I realised that going home might be a little awkward. Travelling alone, in all honesty, is a selfish way to live but now that I am used to it, to the solitude, the rhythm and liberty, how will I go back to the life I knew before?

'Another beer?' The waiter held two bottles in his hand.

'Okay.'

He took the seat beside me and opened both of them with the edge of a key. For some strange reason, he brought up Pinochet and Chile's disappeared. He was the first person to do this, willingly and without prompting.

'There are places all over Chile where people went missing – from the north to the tip of the south. I come from the north and my father, he had several friends who were involved with politics. My village was mainly communist and when Pinochet seized power, many men and women disappeared. Nineteen seventy-three and four were the

worst years for these disappearances. To this day, my village still does not know where some of the bodies are hidden.'

'Why don't the Chilean people demand answers? They have a right to know.'

'Yes, but the military has laws to protect the guilty. There is very little the people of my village can do.' He finished his beer and rose from his chair. 'Forgive me, señorita, but I've said enough and must get back to work.'

September 15, 1970. President Nixon instructs CIA Director Richard Helms to prevent Allende's accession to office. The CIA is to play a direct role in organising a military coup d'état. This involvement comes to be known as Track II.⁹²

* * *

I signed up with the local stargazing company to see the night's sky through Vicuña's world famous telescope (on Cecilia's recommendation of course). At 10p.m., a van took a group of people up to a lookout point resting high above Vicuña and its neighbouring towns nestled deep into the base of the valley.

The sky from this view was tremendous. The tip of the Milky Way wound around falling stars and roaming satellites, gently flashing from behind a fountain of clear, pure light. Light overwhelmed its dark background, so much so that the universe was actually crowded in stars.

The guide herded us into the telescope tower and through the massive, super-strength machine he pointed out star clusters. One was called 'tarantula' because of its spider-like shape, another 'Gabriela Mistral' because it apparently looked like her. When I asked the guide how this ball of light mirrored Gabriela he smiled, 'She is the light of Chile. You must use your imagination.' I understood what he meant but when I pressed

him further his response was, 'Gabriela is Chile, whether we like it or not. By naming a cluster after her, we will always remember her. That is why she exists up there for us. That is why she exists everywhere.'

The guide turned the telescope around. 'And these are the three Virgin Marys.'

It looked like Orion's Belt to me. 'Is it not – ' The guide, annoyed (it seemed), quickly cut me off.

'Or, as it's referred to in the Northern Hemisphere, Orion's Belt.'

This was a completely different universe from the one I had known before. All of the stars were upside down – the Big and Little Dippers lay on their sides, Orion's Belt had flipped over and the Southern Cross shone brightest of all constellations. Not only was I in another world, I was beneath another sky.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Montegrande

*I passed through valley,
plain and river;
songs filled me with melancholy.
Afternoon faded,
tumbled its luminous vase.
And you didn't appear!*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'The Useless Vigil'

It was my last day in this part of the country and I had reserved the day for a village called Montegrande. Before catching the bus there, I bought a bag full of plums and nectarines from a young mother in a wooden stall. She was extremely shy with buckteeth and a nervous twitch. This twitch was so bad that she dropped entire bags of fruit to the ground; apples and oranges rolled randomly across the road, returned to their pyramids only by patient and willing pedestrians. I suppose I could have gone somewhere else to buy my fruit but she obviously needed the business.

When I opened the bag, I knew why. The plums had started to turn into prunes. They were wrinkled, extremely soft, and in the short time it took me to board the gem of a bus, all had split in two. The nectarines were not much better. I ate the fruit anyway, out of hunger more than taste. Once I finished, a man with luggage binded in newspaper and string took the seat beside me. He smoked and encouraged his dog to lie on my feet.

'He won't bite,' the old man promised.

A rooster called out from the back of the bus and soon the adjacent baby pigs were chiming in. I shifted my feet as much as the dog beneath me would permit, smiling at the old man beside me.

* * *

The valley exploded in amber leaves and lush vines. Everything seemed to be climbing towards the sky where clouds sat like cotton floss, light and almost sweet. Several one-room shacks lined the edge of the road; their tin roofs, free range chickens and dancing laundry almost waiting for something else to happen, someone familiar to stop by. An abundance of wildflowers – purple, red and orange – filled the hands of women walking. They held a bunch in one, a small child in the other.

*Always the sound of a river near.
For forty years I've heard it.*

*It's the thrumming of my blood
or a rhythm I was given*

*or the Elqui River of my childhood,
and I breast and ford it.*

*I never lost it; breast to breast
we cling together like two children.⁹³*

We veered with great speed around twists and turns in the narrow dirt road. I held onto the bar in front of me, everyone else held onto their livestock. When we crossed the Gabriela Mistral Bridge, not only did I know we were close to her beloved Montegrande, I also realised how ridiculous this floating 'Gabriela' really was. The question was no longer 'where was she'? It was more like 'where wasn't she'?

'Montegrande!' the driver called out, pulling hard on the wheel of the bus. It looked as if we would crash into the hillside until he hit the brakes. The carriage filled with the smell of burnt rubber. I glanced around to see if any of the other passengers thought this to be unusual driving etiquette but they seemed more interested in the surrounding view than the actual ride.

After hobbling off the bus with a severe case of motion sickness, I saw a sign that read 'Gabriela'. There was a series of new steps neatly laid out before me. I started to walk upwards, one step at a time, following the imbedded stone footprints until I reached the top. A granite statue of Gabriela looked at me then out across the valley. Pebble murals of grapes and flowers circled the memorial, encasing the small space for future generations to appreciate. A plain wooden cross stood tall above the intricate stonework, dying lilies and numerous plaques announcing her birth, death and noble accomplishments. It was a very tranquil space, quiet and isolated. The only sound came from birds calling out from the nearby vineyards.

*They were in the scattered wheat.
As we came near, the whole flock
flew, and the poplars stood
as if struck by a hawk.*

*Sparks in stubble: when they rise,
silver thrown up in air.
They're past before they pass,
too quick for praise.⁹⁴*

Otherwise, it was just Gabriela's bones and me. I lingered for what must have been hours on this platform of memory and finally, after much contemplation, began to understand her. Only a highly intelligent woman could carry herself out of the Elqui Valley and into the public light at such a young age and with such tremendous force. Only a very clever woman could live outwardly as a lesbian but at the same time become a 'Mother Figure' during the first half of the twentieth century, a time when such unconventional lifestyles were looked down on, even shunned. It all made perfect sense to me now. Gabriela's was not a random path of chance and luck but a calculated chain of events. She wanted freedom and writing gave it to her. She knew that, as with any writer, image was

important, so she made herself, her background, her people and her country the focus of her work. Unlike Victoria and Alfonsina, Gabriela did not live to write, she wrote to live. Writing was her ticket out of Chile. It's almost ironic that she ended up buried here, in the country she spent so much of her life travelling away from.

Was it the place? Was it her spirit talking? Was I finally losing my sanity? A little of each or maybe none at all? I do not know. What I do know, however, is that the solitude and space made me realise how important home and country really are. In the end, no matter how much you travel, how much you live, your home holds onto you like no other place can; whether you admit it or not. And this connection, this very powerful connection, eventually brings you back one way or another.

* * *

Monte grande was the smallest town I had ever seen; one road, a few lampposts, even fewer homes, a shop and restaurant all tied together by Gabriela. Her image was everywhere. An almost biblical statue stood in the absolute centre, in spitting distance from her old home and the town's first schoolhouse. Both structures sat beneath the same roof, now converted into a museum.

Two large women stood in the back garden smoking and talking. It took a while for me to grab their attention. Once I did, the largest of the two sold me a ticket.

'Walk around,' she encouraged with a hard pat on my arm.

I stood in the classroom, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. The wooden floorboards creaked and moaned, polished from decades of use. I touched the dirt walls, already crumbling, long desks with carvings from students bored with their lessons. The original chalkboard lay in the far corner of the room, dusty and smeared by

fingerprints. Antique cases contained brittle school documents and photographs of Gabriela with her pupils.

Passing through the back door, I felt a gust of smoke swirl around my face.

‘Her house is there.’ The woman I had bought the ticket from pointed the way with her carton of Lucky Strikes.

‘The house’ was in fact a room behind the schoolhouse. It was even more basic than the one in Vicuña: a bed, stove and compacted dirt floor. I looked out to the view from a window, the garden wild with roses, wisteria and apple blossoms. For the slightest of moments, I saw through the perspective of Gabriela, here, in this place. I could feel her frustration, inspiration and drive to get out. When this is your world, it can close in on you, especially if you are a dreamer and know there is more beyond the windowpane than Montegrande. It was then that I sensed this life was one she had to leave in order to survive mentally and spiritually because if she did not, she would have drowned in her solitude and her choices.

* * *

When I got back to Vicuña, the hostel owner offered to drive me to La Serena. I was catching the bus back to Santiago from there and time, once again, had turned precious.

‘Thank you señor,’ I replied, trying to get a sense of the man. Could I trust him?

‘The decision is yours, señorita. I have daughters of my own; one is studying in Germany and I would be wary of a stranger offering her a ride. Take your time but I am going that way.’

He and I then began talking politics and it soon became clear that this small, thin proprietor was completely harmless. Besides, I wanted our conversation to continue and the ride back to La Serena would be a good place for it.

‘Northern Argentina will be the world’s the next Ethiopia,’ he told me, shaking his head. ‘The children there have swollen bellies and who knows about this? No one! You know why? Because that kind of story gets two minutes on the evening news but this new show, *Big Brother*, gets twenty minutes. It is a disgrace for all of humanity. Chile should help her neighbour because you never know, we could be next.’ He tightened his jaw and gripped the steering wheel.

‘When I was there last month, the people of Buenos Aires were signing petitions and giving what they could. It is an impossible situation without international help.’

The man turned briefly with one eye on me, the other on the road. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And let’s just hope that the tourists travelling through Argentina spread the word. After all, there is more to Argentina than meat, clothes and tango. She is a wounded nation. Her visitors have a great responsibility.’

Chapter Forty

To the Coast

*Valparaiso is fading,
winking with its sailboats
and bannered ships
that call us to embark.
But sirens do not count
with these adventurers.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'Valparaiso'

Viña del Mar was freezing. The rain fell in sharp icy drops, down my shirt and in my eyes. I thought about the beekeepers I had seen on the way into town. Somehow, this image kept me warm.

I found a hotel, paid up front and when I got to my room, I took a hot shower. The gurgling water soothed my skin. My plan was to see Neruda's homes in the area before going back to San Francisco. And I had just enough time to do so, but it would be a tight squeeze. I asked the man behind hotel reception how to get to Valparaíso.

'Take the O bus,' he told me with wide caramel eyes.

* * *

The rain fell in gusty sheets. I tried unfolding my umbrella but it flipped inside out, quickly carried away by the storm. The bus shelter looked inviting. I struggled to get there, to get dry again, and when I made it I squeezed my way in beside a man dressed in leather. He had stars, stripes and a bald eagle painted onto his jacket. A teenage boy stared at his neck covered in tattoos, dreaming (no doubt) of when he would be old enough to do the same.

The bus pulled up eventually and when I boarded, I could not help but give the driver a double take. He looked like Pablo Neruda, exactly like him, right down to the crescent eyebrows and French-styled cap.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To Neruda’s house,’ I replied as casually as I could, expecting him to tell me it was actually *his* house. ‘And could you please tell me when we get there?’

‘No problem,’ he grunted, handing me a ticket.

We drove along the sea front, past enormous fruit markets and salmon-washed houses – stacked lego blocks on the hill. We swayed and climbed up winding roads crowded with dogs and graffiti. An old, lonely-looking man was last to board the bus. He stumbled up the steps, a little drunk, then lit a cigarette beneath the no smoking sign. The driver knew him from somewhere and the two men were soon chatting away.

The longer and higher the bus climbed, the more I questioned if we were actually travelling in the right direction. I did not want to interrupt the driver’s conversation but the territory we had entered looked a little rough for Neruda. Finally, with a near empty bus, we pulled into a depot.

‘Excuse me señor but where is Neruda’s house?’

The driver lit his own cigarette and rose. ‘Wait here,’ he told me as he walked off the bus with his new friend. His belly shook and his eyebrows lifted. ‘I’ll take you there on my way back.’

I found a seat somewhere in the middle and waited, then I waited some more.

Finally, Neruda’s look-a-like returned with a can of coke. He turned over the engine and

we drove back the way we came, picking up policemen and schoolchildren along the way.

‘Here,’ he called out, pulling off to the side of the road. ‘This is La Sebastiana.’

Jacaranda trees bloomed full and bright only here, their colours were a darker indigo than they had been in Buenos Aires. The fog hung low on the city, sprawling wide from the Pacific's shore.

*Some time, man or woman, traveller,
afterwards, when I am not alive,
look here, look for me here
between the stones and the ocean,
in the light storming
in the foam.*

*Look here, look for me here,
for here is where I shall come, saying nothing,
no voice, no mouth, pure,
here I shall be again the movement
of water, of
its wild heart,*

*here I shall be both lost and found –
here I shall be perhaps both stone and silence.⁹⁵*

I followed the residential street until I found a sign. La Sebastiana lay tall above its neighbours, an enormous post-modern structure blending various styles and designs. The entrance had an almost Middle Eastern look; peach arches, brick pillars and azure walls but the structure above it was square, stacked and asymmetrical. Small circular windows and new wooden extensions were piled on top of each other overlooking the sea. Inside, a labyrinth of massive windows and antiques, small sculptures, rare paintings and tacky souvenirs crowded the space between.

‘His summerhouse,’ a woman in the corner confirmed. She held on to an important-looking walkie-talkie. ‘The 1985 earthquake destroyed most of the house. We had to remodel.’

Nodding, I wondered if Neruda would have approved.

* * *

From La Sebastiana, I trekked down to the centre of Valparaíso but the numerous *ascensores* stopped me in my tracks. I had never seen such unusual little carts: individual metal boxes with rusty doors and even rustier wheels. They moaned and squeaked all over the city, climbing up and down hillsides like amusement park rides. This unusual mode of public transport dates back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Initially designed to provide an alternative to the series of steep and daunting steps you must climb if you want to go anywhere beyond the city centre, they have, in turn, put Valparaíso on the map. Distinct not only in Chile but also the rest of the world, these *ascensores* have now become a tourist attraction for those who dare to trust them. Because of my fear of death from high places, I took the stairs instead.

The centre of the city definitely had a port feel to it. Sailors patrolled the streets in uniform, navy ships pulled into the dock and the air smelt of fish. I wandered aimlessly into plazas and markets. Corner butcher shops proudly displayed calf heads in their windows (their eyes transfixed on the moment of their death). Restaurateurs beckoned me into their empty eateries. Homeless men on park benches fiddled with the volume switch on their transistor radios. What stood out the most though were the magnificent abandoned buildings. They had been so neglected that restoration seemed an impossible idea. I took a seat next to a homeless man with the quietest radio, trying my best to

memorise their shapes and curves, their embroidered faces and chiselled spines. It might be the last time I ever come here and I did not want to forget.

* * *

From Valparaíso I made my way to Isla Negra, Neruda's third and final house. I ate round flat bread along the way, conscious but indifferent to what it was doing to my hips and thighs.

This house was by far my favourite, pressed in beside others in a residential seafront area, enveloped in eucalyptus trees, coastlines and blue from both sky and sea. This is where Neruda and Matilde are buried, side by side, in a grassy bed overlooking the ocean. Between the house and the beach is a little shed where Neruda wrote and beside the shed, a rowboat that never left the land. A star made out of eucalyptus wood stands planted deep in the sand; several copper bells hang from its points. The inside of this house is not unlike the others but it does have a distinct coastal feel to it. There are several bars, figureheads, bottled ships, African statues and coloured glass (Neruda said water and wine tasted better when drunk from coloured glass) only this house somehow maintains his essence. Although extremely popular with tourists, it feels like his real home.

*I have to remember everything,
keep track of blades of grass, the threads
of the untidy event, and
the houses, inch by inch,
the long lines of the railway,
the textured face of pain.*

*If I should get one rosebush wrong
and confuse night with a hare,
or even if one whole wall
has crumbled in my memory,
I have to make the air again,*

*steam, the earth, leaves,
hair and bricks as well,
the thorns which pierced me,
the speed of the escape.*

Take pity on the poet.⁹⁶

Chapter Forty-One

Mapping Memory

*It is the truth, not a fairytale:
there is a Guardian Angel
who takes you and carries you
like the wind
and follows children wherever they go.*

– Gabriela Mistral, from 'Guardian Angel'

When I returned to Santiago, I packed my bags then left them in the Casa Roja's storage room. There were a few people I had to say good-bye to and Beatriz was one of them. She invited me for one last lunch at her home.

'One o'clock,' she confirmed over the phone. 'Flor will prepare something nice.'

I decided I would bring dessert and a card to thank her for her kindness. She had gone out of her way for me and I did enjoy meeting her. She was the type of person whose path I would have missed had it not been for our mutual contact. Beatriz gave me a different perspective on Chile. Not only did she show me what life was like in a typical (or perhaps not so typical) Santiago household but she was living proof that not all upper class, South American women writers marry doctors. Beatriz was the independent breadwinner of her family and I respected that.

Finding a thank you card for her, however, was easier said than done. No bookshops, metro stations or department stores stocked them and stationery shops did not exist. Whenever I asked, the response was the same.

'What? What is that?'

Eventually I found myself in a paper shop just around the corner from the hostel. When I inquired about cards, two old men leaned over the counter to apologise in song. They sang Scottish Highland ballads in Spanish and recited Neruda's poetry in unison. People passing stopped to stare. What at first felt a little embarrassing, quickly transformed into an endearing memory because they were not only amazing singers, they were also good-hearted. I spent most of my morning listening to them and looking back on the memory, there is no other way I would have wanted to spend my last Chilean morning. I never did find a card but what I did stumble across in a nearby hippie shop was a postcard of Gabriela Mistral. It would have to do.

The bakery on the corner of Parque Brazil sold a variety of sweet-smelling delicacies. I bought an apple torte for the pretty pink box and a ribbon that cost more than the torte itself. I only hoped Beatriz liked apples.

I arrived at Beatriz's home at one o'clock sharp with postcard and box in hand. Flor greeted me warmly.

'The señora has not arrived yet. She called to say she is running late and will soon be on her way. Fionita, she asked if you could wait for her in the study?'

Flor took the torte in the kitchen then led me to the room in the back. A stack of books was waiting for me. Afternoon light played with the slits in the blinds. I made myself comfortable in the leather armchair and skimmed through all that had been provided.

Nearly an hour passed before Beatriz arrived.

'I was marking papers and got carried away,' she offered.

I told her I did not mind. The books she had left me were fascinating.

* * *

The entire hostel saw me off and as everyone sat in the courtyard drinking, talking and laughing inside a fat setting sun, I thought about how much had transpired in the last couple of months. My entire experience flashed before me and all I could do was try to hold on – in my mind, on the page. And in this moment it occurred to me that I was going to miss deeply not only Chile but also my nomadic life in Latin America. I was going to miss following in the footsteps of Victoria, Alfonsina and Gabriela. Even if I never knew them when they were alive, I certainly felt I knew them now. Through time, ink and travel, they had somehow become my friends. Their lives, work and countries were now familiar, no longer mysteries but understandings that have become a very big part of me. Victoria, Alfonsina and Gabriela who had once been my inspiration, my guides, were now forever locked into my memory. Every time I think of them, I will also think of the path that led me to them and those who held my wrist along the way. I am forever grateful to all of the people who helped me, for without their generosity, my nightmare would have most probably come true: I would have ended up sitting alone in a hotel room like some madwoman in her attic.

This journey, this rite-of-passage, has certainly opened my eyes, nourished my mind and brought my spirit to a place I could have never imagined previously. It is strange how living in the presence of the past awakens you, how it makes you stop and realise that the past really is not so far away – at least, not as far as you might think.

I have learned so many valuable lessons over the course of these last few months. Firstly, that love, real love, does stand the test of time regardless of miles, adventure or dead women and unmarked maps. How important that love can be in the middle of a

Santiago night when you are cold, hungry and homesick. And how utter bliss is the only word that comes to mind when the one you love is standing on the opposite end of Customs, waiting for you to run back into his arms. I have also learned, no more or less important, that the voices of the dead are never silenced – only forgotten – and that it is the responsibility of the living to let them be heard.

Notes

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- ¹² Jason Wilson. (2000) *Buenos Aires* (p.90).
- ¹³ Victoria Ocampo. "Palabras francesas." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.52).
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- ¹⁶ Victoria Ocampo. "Al margen de Ruskin (Algunas reflexiones sobre la lectura)." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.46).
- ¹⁷ Alfonsina Storni. "The She-Wolf." *Alfonsina Storni Selected Poems* (p.1).
- ¹⁸ Victoria Ocampo. "La trastienda de la istoria." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.9).
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- ²² Alfonsina Storni. (1979) "El amo del mundo." In Sonia Jones (tr) *Alfonsina Storni*. Boston: Twayne Publishers (p.28).
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- ²⁹ Victoria Ocampo. "La mujer y el voto." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (pp.147-148).
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- ³² Victoria Ocampo. "Autobiografía III." *Writer, Feminist, Woman of the World* (p.47).
- ³³ Waldo Frank. "Letter dated February 25, 1931." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.114).
- ³⁴ Victoria Ocampo. "Autobiografía III." *Writer, Feminist, Woman of the World* (p.47).

- ³⁵ *Ibid* (p.51).
- ³⁶ *Ibid* (p.17).
- ³⁷ Alfonsina Storni. "Las grandes figuras nacionales: Alfonsina Storni." *Alfonsina Storni* (p.23).
- ³⁸ —. "Genio y figura de Alfonsina Storni." *Ibid* (p.23).
- ³⁹ —. "My Lady of Poetry." *Ibid* (p.42).
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- ⁴⁴ Alfonsina Storni. "Cositas sueltas." *Alfonsina Storni* (p.40).
- ⁴⁵ Victoria Ocampo. "Una vista a Victoria Ocampo." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.32).
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- ⁵⁰ —. "Fani 1949." *Ibid* (p.200).
- ⁵¹ *Ibid* (pp.207-208).
- ⁵² —. "Autobiografía I." *Writer, Feminist, Woman of the World* (p.21).
- ⁵³ Alfonsina Storni. "León Benarós, 'Vida entre dos cartas.'" *Alfonsina Storni* (pp.55-56).
- ⁵⁴ Victoria Ocampo. "Lo unico que pedimos." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.99).
- ⁵⁵ —. "Tagore on the Banks of the River Plate." *Ibid* (p.68).
- ⁵⁶ Alfonsina Storni. "Las grandes figuras nacionales: Alfonsina Storni." *Alfonsina Storni* (p.45).
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- ⁵⁸ Victoria Ocampo. "Autobiografía V." *Writer, Feminist, Woman of the World* (p.73).
- ⁵⁹ Alfonsina Storni. "Entretelones de un estreno." *Alfonsina Storni* (p.89).
- ⁶⁰ Victoria Ocampo. "The Man with the Whip." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.252).
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- ⁶² Victoria Ocampo. "The Man with the Whip." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.255).
- ⁶³ Doris Meyer. *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.130).
- ⁶⁴ Alfonsina Storni. "El Hogar." *Alfonsina Storni* (p.33).
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- ⁶⁶ —. "Letter to Delfina Bunge." *Writer, Feminist, Woman of the World* (pp.36-37).
- ⁶⁷ —. "Palabras francesas." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.173).
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- ⁶⁹ Victoria Ocampo. "La hora de la verdad." *Against the Wind and the Tide* (pp.232-233).
- ⁷⁰ Doris Meyer. *Against the Wind and the Tide* (p.157).
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